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LOVERS
IN THE PRESENT
HAUNTED BY A
PASSION FROM THE PAST...

EMELLE

Melissa Mather

"Emelie," he said, "my longing for you hasn't misled me?" and he touched my hair by my brow; his finger traveled the curve of my cheek. "You do want me here with you?"

His hand, light as a feather, drifted down to my throat, down to my shoulder, where he commenced to unfasten my nightdress. "Yes," I breathed. "Yes, oh yes . . ."

And then he swiftly and surely drew my nightdress down over my feet, keeping me covered the while against the cold. He slid between the sheets and reached for me in the darkness.

It was so different from that other time. He was in no hurry, for one thing. He was not greedy, as if he feared something he craved would be snatched from him. And I . . . I felt as if I had been on a long, long journey and was nearing the end, and there was no danger here, nor shame, nor fear of failure, only safety—strength and warmth and unity and trust.

"Emelie," he whispered, and he kissed me, and his hand cradled my breast and stroked the curve of my hip, and my body awoke. After a while, neither too soon nor too long, I was entirely his.

EMELIE

Melissa Mather

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to my daughter
Elizabeth

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Chapter One



October 2nd, 1819

It is eleven o'clock in the morning, the world is wrapped in stillness, and I am alone.

When I reflect that one month ago I was safe in the haven of my father's house, a daughter, not a wife, that I had never heard of Tamarack or of its proud architect Mr. Israel Carson, I marvel at the speed with which the entire fabric of my life has altered. I know it is folly to look back, and so I shall not. I am firmly resolved with God's help not to despair.

I commence this Journal on the fifth day of my marriage. I shall keep it for comfort and for companionship. Indeed, it may prove my only companion, for Tamarack is a grievous isolated house, and my husband, I find, is not of a nature to encourage social intercourse.

This room where I sit has windows on three walls, but they look out on nothing. To the south, were the sun shining, I might see the lake at the foot of the slope; at this hour its shore is still smothered in the mist that lingers now almost until midday. There is, of course, nothing there—no pavilion, no boat house, not even a seat to accommodate the venturesome: only those haunted trees turning pale with dread at the dying of the year.

To the west, above the roof of the woodshed and beyond the hump of the smoke house, I can catch a glimpse of an orchard; the young trees must be just commencing to bear, for on one a sparse cluster of golden apples gleams like a jewel, and on three others—I am counting with care—there is a total of five and thirty gnarled and knobby ruby balls.

To the north the slope rises like a battlefield to meet the sky. The black blotches where the timber was piled and burned are like wounds suppurating on the land. The

sheep wander among the stumps like survivors searching for the bodies of their fallen comrades. My husband tells me they are very superior sheep—Merinos, they are called, imported from Spain. I find them very strange-looking, for their deep pelts are much wrinkled, like a child's far-too-large knitted shift. We passed some of their number as we came up the brook road from the east; they stared at us over the stone wall as the horses laboured up that cruel hill. (I offered to dismount from the curricule and walk, but my husband answered nothing to this suggestion but to apply the whip.)

This room is my citadel, my island. "Your sitting room, my dear," said Mr. Carson, ushering me into it with pride—justifiable, I now realize. It could have been no easy matter to transport the Turkey carpet here, or the velvet hangings. Though I would wish these not so rich a ruby—it is a colour not exceptionally flattering to my wretched tangerine hair! (Though even to notice this, as Aunt Lavinia would be quick to point out, is indicative of my lamentable ingratitude and selfishness. Alas, that *holy* matrimony has not made me perfect!)

The carpet is exceedingly large and covers almost the entire room, which in itself is of most generous size, being fully as large as the kitchen below. Otherwise the room is as yet somewhat scantily furnished. There is a rocker of wood, not new; a small settee in pale green brocade; a rather shaky tea table; a lady's writing desk elegantly inlaid with gilt leather; two side chairs, carved, of mahogany; and a great sturdy oak chair with a seat of black leather—this for Mr. Carson when it pleases him to join me. The panelled walls are bare but are not displeasing, being freshly painted a delicate green; he has promised me to paper them in the French manner as soon as he has chosen an appropriate subject. Of my own possessions there are none, except for the pair of candlesticks on the mantelpiece, these the gift of my dear father.

It was one month ago that Mr. Carson journeyed to Boston in particular to find him a wife. Being nothing if not a practical man, in order to ensure that the journey would not prove fruitless he accompanied a shipment of his carded wool. While in the Haymarket he met my father through a mutual acquaintance, who chanced to inform him that "Mr. Stark has a daughter of marriageable

age, comely, healthy, and tractable." (In a word, myself.) Mr. Carson came to drink a dish of tea with my father and my aunt, and to look me over, like a horse trader. Apparently liking what he saw, he offered for me.

"The gentleman is a widower," my father explained to me. "He has lost his wife in childbirth, and the child—a daughter—is not yet four years old, and sadly in need of a mother's care. But Emelie, my love," said my father, his eyes anxious, "if you do not wish to marry, I shall not urge you. I informed your suitor with the utmost frankness that I was unconvinced you were fitted for the life of a frontier wife—that you had never split a handful of kindling in your life. Here in Boston, said I, no housewife need concoct her own soap or even dip her own candles unless she wishes. To this Mr. Carson replied that upon his wife's death he hired a housekeeper, an excellent woman skilled in all such matters; he would not be marrying you, he said, in order to rid himself of paying servants. I must say—" my father seemed to have an impediment in his throat, which he was obliged to clear with some difficulty—"this Israel Carson seems to be a man of substance, but you must not, of course, let that influence you! True, he has offered to assist me in recovering my—ah—my somewhat crippled fortunes—he says it would give him the deepest satisfaction to help me reverse the ill effects of the late blockade, but you must not let this influence you." My father took out his kerchief and wiped his forehead. "I confess, my dear child, that I, too—for I, like Mr. Carson, am but forty years of age—I *had* thought to court the relic of my former partner, but you must not let even this influence you! Your dear aunt assures me that in the event of my remarriage you will be most welcome under her roof." He coughed. "I—I do most deeply regret, my child, that I have not been in a position to attract for you the suitors you deserve. It shocks me that Mr. Carson is the first—" He blew his nose. "However . . . he desires an answer."

My father was of course entirely reticent about the only important aspect of the matter: i.e., would Mr. Carson please me in our intimate relationship as man and wife? About this he left me to make up my own mind, which I endeavored, as best I could in my abysmal ignorance, to do. I saw that my suitor was a man of upright bearing.

Although not a scholarly figure—no scholar, I felt sure, could have such breadth of shoulder or length of arm—yet his face (I thought) was that of a man of intellect, his eyes deep-set and his mien most serious. I even thought (thus did I beguile myself) that a loving wife could coax laughter to those eyes, a smile to that stern mouth.

Out of courtesy (for I did not think she knew much more about the matter than I) I consulted with my aunt as to whether she thought I could be that wife.

"True, he is older than you by twenty years," said my aunt Lavinia, nodding judiciously. "But this can have its advantages, my dear—better an old man's darling than a young man's slave, you know!" She patted her curls. "How odd to think that the very year I was cradling you in my arms, poor motherless babe, your future bridegroom was poling his way up the Connecticut River, a veritable Ajax assaulting Troy!" She smoothed her skirts. "A figure of speech, dear child," she said complacently. "But do you not think it was *heroic* to go into the savage north to seek his fortune? To wrest a home out of the trackless wilderness?" Since Mr. Carson—if my aunt's information was accurate—must have accomplished this heroic feat in 1799, when the Republic of Vermont had already been the Fourteenth State for eight years, I felt these glowing terms were sheer romantic hyperbole. "At which it appears he was *most* successful, Emelie," she was continuing, her eyes glowing. "He has already built himself a house of brick, he tells us, with two parlours, and a dining salon—'my wife shall not take her meals in the *kitchen*,' he said proudly—and *four* large bedchambers as well as a sitting room for your exclusive use. The house also—and I collect this is most unusual in his locality—has an indoor water closet, dear child!"

"But *Aunt*," said I, "Mr. Carson is the same age as Father!"

"Forty is not so old for a man as it is for a woman. Besides, the gentleman appears to be in good health, and vigorous. Perhaps—" she lowered her voice, her cheeks flushed—"perhaps he won't importune you as much as would a younger man, but this too can be a blessing—a child every *other* year instead of *every* year can hardly be termed a *deprivation*. Indeed, in every way this union appears most suitable and advantageous! I *do* hope, Eme-

lie, you are not going to fiddle and faddle about, while such an excellent prospect as Mr. Carson must cool his heels, and *may*—if you prove frivolously willful—cool his heart!”

I answered Mr. Carson—as I had known all along I would—in the affirmative. *It was my own free will.* I must never forget that. However much my father desired this union, he would have accepted—and in time forgiven—my refusal. My father *loves* me, I know he does! As I love him. And so I cannot tell him now—I cannot write him anything but trivialities—never the truth.

The banns were posted, in Boston and in Welkin, too, I was told. My father, because he *does* love me and also because he has his pride, bought me a new gown in which to be married. It is deep green velvet, and my aunt Lavinia helped me to make it ready—we had only the two weeks before Mr. Carson would be back in Boston, and how we hurried, stitching away as if our lives depended on it! Women! So illogical and romantic! What did it matter that I had a new gown in which to take my vows?

So it was that Mr. Carson returning for me, without any further fuss or ado we were married, at noon on the twenty-eighth of September in my father’s parlour. After a brief collation we set out on the stage for Concord and the north. “I prefer to commence our married life under my own roof,” my husband informed me. “I have no wish to subject you to the vulgarity of a wedding night in a common inn—we shall travel with the mail and go straight through to Woodstock, where I have left my own team. From there it is only three hours further to Tamarack.”

And so we came, and so it was with eyes glazed with exhaustion—for we travelled straight through, stopping only to eat: twenty-four hours on the road!—that I first gazed at the house that is to be my home, I fear, for the rest of my natural life.

As we swept up the drive to the central door, Mr. Carson remarked that when he’d brought Elizabeth Pinney from Bridgeport, they’d come by flatboat to Bellows Falls, and had to finish the journey by oxcart, so vile were the roads. “Everything is easier now with the turnpikes,” he added, to which I endeavoured to give an assenting smile. He pointed with his whip to what appeared to be the

kitchen wing. "I fashioned that with my own hands, drawing the bricks from the kilns in Woodstock," he went on in a dry, impersonal tone, as if he no longer felt much kinship with the young man who had so laboured. "What took us three hours today took three days then. The main house was built to please Elizabeth Pinney, and to house the children we expected to have. She did not live to see it finished, which may strike you as somewhat unfair, for it was built with her money, though furnished with mine. You are the first Mistress Carson to step over its threshold. I trust that will be of sufficient gratification to you as its mistress, and that you will not be demanding changes, for it suits me exactly, just as it is."

I confess I thought these remarks singularly tactless—I really did not care to hear the name of my predecessor *twice* in as many minutes as I was about to set foot for the first time in my married home! But there had been no grief, nothing that might trouble a second wife, especially one (like myself) unsure of her exact position in her husband's affections. "*. . . not be demanding . . .*" As if I would dare! I could not imagine putting *any* sort of demand to Israel Carson, master of Tamarack! For I had had twenty-four hours in which to study my husband's face, under all sorts of lighting: in the smoky candlelight when we stopped for a late supper in the crowded, boisterous inn; in the moonlight that flickered past the leather curtains of the coach; at dusk, at dawn, and now at mid-day—and a colder face I could not recall. *He is a man of ice*, I thought once—the coach was rocking and plunging over a particularly vicious stretch of log road, yet there he sat, aloof and withdrawn, his face expressionless. *No, he is a man of stone*, I thought, observing the line of his mouth. Then he turned his eyes towards me, and something—some warmth, like coals on the hearth—glowed in their depths. But still, even when his eyes warmed towards me, I could not imagine *asking* him anything, not even to slow our journeying, not even to break our journey and let me rest.

An unkempt lad in ragged breeches ran up to hold the horses, staring at me curiously as Mr. Carson handed me down. I walked thankfully up the steps and into the wide and pleasant hallway that divides the house. At the far

end the door stood open to the sun (for the day was warm as summer) and a child fled as I entered.

"Constance!" said my husband in a voice of thunder.

She crept back into view.

"Come herel!" said Mr. Carson, as one might speak to a horse, or a dog. ("*Ho, lass! Heel, boy!*") "Take your fingers from your mouth. And curtsy to your new mother—have ye no manners?"

Trembling, the child dropped me a curtsy. She did not raise her eyes above the hem of my gown.

"How do you do, Constance? I hope we shall be friends." I wished I could pat her head or stroke her cheek—anything to stop that trembling, which I find unbearable in any creature, human, dog, cat, bird—I care not what.

From this disturbing encounter we proceeded up the staircase and along the upper passages to this my sitting room, my citadel, my refuge.

About our wedding night I shall write nothing, not even in the privacy of these pages, other than: *it passed*. My aunt Lavinia, unmarried herself, could offer me little by way of counsel; when I appealed to her for enlightenment, she who was always wordy and loquacious about unimportant matters confined her efforts to a hurried, "Endure it—it is your duty." And so—*obedience* is one of the vows—I endured it.

But it does astonish me that for such moments women have risked their honour and men their lives.

Thus the second night of our married life passed, in its way more exhausting than the first. And the night before last. And last night. I am dutiful: I submit, I endure. But when I reflect that I am but twenty years of age, and in every year remaining to me there may be fully *three hundred* (at least!) such connubial nights, I (like Constance) am seized by a fit of trembling. So must a soldier feel, I think, who finds he has enlisted not for six months or a year but through some tragic or careless mischance has signed away his entire lifetime. When I contemplate the future, truly what I feel borders more on panic than despair.

I cannot. *I cannot I cannot.*

But I do.

October 8th

Constance begins to be less afraid of me, I believe. At first she fled whenever I approached—fled to the kitchen, where there is brawny Mrs. Ransom, a giant of a woman with a ruddy face like a ripe apple and an arm as powerful as a man's. Mrs. Ransom presides over the vast cooking pots and seems to have some skill with sauces and spices, for the dishes (though plain fare with no pretensions to elegance) are wholesome and quite appetisingly prepared. She as good as ordered me from underfoot—"He give me his word ye'd not be meddlin'," is the way she put it, the one time I ventured to intrude on her territory. I must admit the sight of the enormous fireplace with its hooks and spits and spiders—Tamarack does not boast anything so newfangled as a *range*—made me most agreeable to obeying her, and I retreated.

Poor Aunt Lavinia! All her belated instructions on how to mold candles, how to make soap—all for naught! My husband informs me such chores lie entirely within the province of Mrs. Ransom, who is jealous of her prerogatives. As if I were likely to challenge her supremacy over woodbox and ashpan, butter churn and cheese press! I am not expected to do anything much, except to occupy myself with my needle when I am not attending to my husband, anticipating his wants and providing whatever is necessary to allay his thirst (which is prodigious) or his various hungers. He likes me to wait on him at table, carrying the platters to him from the sideboard. He watches me silently as I go about this duty, his face close to expressionless. Sometimes I wonder what it is he sees, for it seems to me his eyes under their heavy brows are gazing at something much further away than I, making my way from board to table and back again.

While I serve my husband, the child sits silent in her chair, watching the two of us, her eyes wide and dark. I do not know why I find this unnerving, but I do. Perhaps it is because I have been so accustomed to my aunt Lavinia's mindless twittering, and my father's patient and amused replies. Nothing much of value or import was said, as I recall, but there was never this silence at meals. There was never this lack—total and utter—of laughter.

Aside from that one remark about Elizabeth Pinney's death, my husband has said nothing to me about the

motherlessness of his daughter. Indeed, now that I give the matter some thought, it occurs to me it was only my father who made any reference whatsoever to Constance's "pitiful state". Nevertheless, I conceive it is my plain duty to win the child's trust and train her in faith, truth, and goodness. I think she senses this concern of mine, and is grateful for it: today she crept up to me as I was walking on the terrace—there was a brawling mob of blackbirds clustering in the elm; to amuse myself I was trying to count them—when I felt a timid tug at my skirt, and there she was. I was as unaccountably flattered as if a fawn had approached me from the forest—as if somehow my own abhorrence of violence and of the abuse of power has communicated itself to her. For I feel she is a child who has been intimidated, if not by her father, then by Life itself.

I too was left motherless by my birth, but I have never—at least heretofore—felt abandoned. My father, preoccupied as he was by his failing fortunes, nevertheless was always glad to see me—he never resented my appearance in his office, but would rise to greet me as if I were a great lady! But Constance behaves as if she has felt herself an intruder from the day of her birth, as if she has always felt the need to solicit the indulgence of the adults about her; I suspect she has found them unpredictable, moody, and more than a little frightening. I submit as evidence for this supposition of mine her behavior in her father's presence: the child goes rigid with terror, I swear it, though I have never seen him lay a hand on her, and she has no evidence on her little body of any beatings, at least not recently. Nevertheless, her behavior frightens *me*, I confess it. If this is the effect Mr. Carson has on his own flesh and blood, what might his conduct be towards a mere wife?

Already I commence to behave as doth the child: I stiffen, I suffer a chill, whenever he comes near. He does not speak harshly to me; certainly he has never threatened to strike me. He offers me no violence, nothing one could call violence. But he is *in all things* the same: conscientious, unflinching in the faithful performance of his duty; and plain-spoken, and cold, and direct, and efficient, and thorough. (Oh, God, *how* thorough!) And so

the night casts a shadow over the day, and my life is penitence.

For I have made a grievous, a terrible mistake! One should marry for love, *only* for love! I thought I could come to love him—I would try, I would be an obedient, dutiful, submissive wife, and for reward I would come to love Israel Carson as I believed he loved me—for did he not choose me? Was he not a man of middle years, of much experience, who knew what marriage meant?

"First comes marriage, *then* comes love," my aunt Lavinia told me. I believed her! I can't imagine why, now—she never was one for wise pronouncements. I believed her because I wanted to believe her—I wanted to marry, to get away, away from my father's prospective new wife, away from my aunt's tedious chatter, away from the staid confines of Boston—I wanted to see something of what lay beyond those horizons that had hemmed me in ever since I could remember—and how could I, a mere female, do this but by marriage? Besides—I confess it—I was lonely, and longed for I knew not what . . . companionship . . . closeness . . . understanding . . . friendship . . . harmony of spirit. So naive was I, I thought these felicities were conferred by the marriage blessing.

If I could love him, my idle, lonely days would be bearable; they would be a gift of myself, that I offer to him. Instead, they are a penance, which I must pay because I committed the sin of stupidity; they are a prison, to which I am condemned without hope of reprieve.

Now I do think I learn what loneliness is.

It is only the tenth day of the tenth month, but already the snows come down like feathers, smothering every tree and stone. Many of the maples still sport their gaudy leaves; it is a giddy sight, to see their scarlet and gold capped with white—it is as if they are tricked out for a carnival!

I had a fright as I was finishing penning my last entry. Just as I was closing the cover of my desk, there came that single knock on the door, which opened at once and my husband entered, as always without delay, as if he has rights which override mere manners. I never hear him approach—he has a singularly light step for so large a man.

Something in my face must have alerted him, for he

looked at me with unusual sharpness and said, "What is it? Are you ill?"

"Ill?" I said faintly, struggling to assemble my resources. What would I do if he demanded to see what I had written? "No—far from it. I am entirely—entirely well," I stammered. "I—I am writing to my aunt. She—she does seem very far away . . ."

He gazed at me for a long moment without speaking; it seemed to me surely he could hear the frantic beating of my heart. Then: "It seems a bit soon, Emelie, but if it's women's advice ye're needing, I'll send the parson's wife to you. She's had eight of her own; she'll be more use to you than that silly hen of an aunt of yours."

"No—no, nothing like *that*," I said hurriedly. "I—I was just feeling homesick."

His face tightened. "*This* is your home now—you have no other. If ye're writing mawkish nonsense of that sort to your aunt, give it to me—I'll put it in the fire." And he held out his hand.

I did not move. "No, truly," I said, "I do not but boast about—about this beautiful house—the—the Adam doorway—Aunt would be *most* impressed by its elegance," I babbled. "I—I am embarrassed that you should read my—my *frivolous* lines—"

A flicker of a smile touched his mouth. "What a child you are," he said. "Finish your letter, then—or commence over, and redo it, if ye've put aught in not fit for my eyes. I go to Welkin tomorrow, and can put it on the mail coach for you then."

When he had gone out, I tore a sheet from the back of my Journal and feverishly dashed off a letter to my aunt, describing the main house with its four great chimneys and its two Palladian windows in terms so glowing, one would think I had never seen a decent brick house before. All the while my pen flew, I searched about in my mind: *where* was I to keep my Journal? For it was only a matter of time before my husband, feeling I have no more right to *thoughts* I keep hidden from him than I have to secret parts of my body (which he explores with military thoroughness night after night after night after night), investigates the contents of my desk, with such consequences as I shudder to think. I could of course burn what I have written—there is always the fire, offering its

warm embrace—but I have a strange feeling that to destroy these words of mine is to commence to destroy myself.

I was just finishing a full page of schoolgirlish effusion when there came a timid scratching at the door, and at my invitation, Constance crept in. She was dressed in bonnet and tippet, and on her feet were those curious overboots made of fur.

"In one short minute, little sparrow," I said, "I shall be finished and out we will go into that snowy faeryland. Do stand over by the window so you don't become overheated."

As always, at the slightest kind word she blossomed. She skipped across to the window, looking out towards the lake, and as she ran across the room, there came a sharp *creak!* from under the edge of the carpet. Constance stopped, stepped back, stepped forward again: *creak!* went the floor. She dimpled at me. "What are you hiding here, New-Mother? A little mouse?"

"Little mouse yourself," I said. "It's just a loose board, no doubt. Now leave me be, so I can finish . . ."

But when I had written, "Your respectful and devoted niece, Emelie," and had sanded and folded the sheet, and got my own bonnet and heavy shawl, and put on my own fur overboots and we had gone out to tramp up and down the terrace in a curling, intricate path so that in the snow was writ *Constance Carson*—"There!" I said. "Now you know how to write your name! You are a *very* learned young lady!"—and Constance scattered crumbs for the birds and laughed at the antics of a squirrel, all this while I could hardly wait to get back in, and go to my sitting room and turn back the carpet and poke and pry and tug and *pray*—and my prayers were answered! There was indeed a loose board, a friendly and obliging altogether *beneficent* board which I managed to pry up an inch or so, and into this slot I slid my Journal, first tying it in a sling of scarf, the end of which I just barely caught in between the loose board and its neighbor. Then I rolled the carpet back in place, and stepped on the board. It still creaked, but less aggressively, more conspiratorily, it seemed to me.

I could hear my husband's voice in the room below—he seemed to have returned early from the carding mill—

and so I brushed my gown and smoothed my hair, and glided from the room to go down and pour the tea.

It is a great comfort to think of my words safe from any prying eyes snug in their hidey hole under the Turkey carpet. It is as if there is *one* place in this house where I can be private—where *I* can go (at least my thoughts can go) and no one else can enter. As long as I take care to bring my Journal forth only when Mr. Carson has safely gone out, as he does every day, riding abroad to look over his flocks or to supervise the work in the mills—for he has built him two more, and is now the proud owner of a sawmill below the mountain, the carding mill near Ransom's Bridge, and a grain mill in Welkin itself—as I say, once my husband has gone out, I am safe to confide to my Journal whatever needs to be told; and as the words are put down on paper, my spirit eases, I feel less lonely, and something of my apprehension—formless and without foundation—lessens.

October 17th

The snow was no more than a warning, a slight foretaste of what is to come. It has all melted off, and the maples, though much subdued, still clutch their leaves to them. Constance and I take our daily walks once again, and it is like two prisoners released from gaol that we stroll abroad, for it is only out of the house—out of sight of its watchful windows—that we talk freely, and laugh, and sing. I do not know if it is the house or its master—both, perhaps, for the one is the creation of the other—but within its walls I do feel at times a lack of air, as if I am being smothered. (No doubt that is just my fancy.)

Sometimes I wonder if my husband is no man of flesh and blood but of stone: chipped and fashioned from slate and granite and marble. For how can he *not* love Constance? Never snatch her up and toss her, shrieking, in the air, as my father did me! Never hug her or kiss her, never stroke her hair! I am reluctant to pen these words, but it may be truth: he is an unnatural father.

Last evening I had spooned up the stew, a savoury mess of squirrel and pigeon, when he saw that Constance was but toying with her spoon. "Eat!" he said, and when she raised her eyes to his, sorrow swam in those dark pools. "It is squirrel," she whispered.

"Mister Ransom trapped them on the far ridge—" I was beginning, when "Silence!" my husband snapped at me, and to Constance: "Squirrel's tail or lark's tongue, it is your duty to eat what is set before you!" And he waited, his face like marble, until the poor child lifted her spoon and, trembling, commenced to sip from its edge. Then he turned again to me. "I forbid you to interfere between the child and myself. It does not concern you."

I brought the basket of bread and, my knees shaking, I slid into my chair; I dared not look at Constance. "Forgive me," I said in a low voice. "I had thought that was why you took me to wife—to be a mother to your daughter."

He looked at me. His eyes held burning embers in their depths. "Then you were wrong," he said, his voice thickening. "I had other reasons." He lifted his glass and drained it.

October 28th

I have been one month a bride.

No, that is not true: I have never been a bride—I have been a wife, nothing more. A bride is welcomed, and cherished—made much of. A wife—what is she? Her husband's possession. His bondservant. His shadow.

Once Israel Carson did take to himself a bride, but it was not I. Nor was it Constance's mother, she who could endure the flatboat and the oxteam trip hither, yet died bearing Constance. The truth came out in the following way:

In this season called Indian Summer, when the sky burns deep blue and the soft air teases with memories of true summer, Constance and I daily walked a bit farther and farther. Yesterday was exceptionally mellow: the sun (there was no wind) was warm on our cheeks, and one could almost believe there would be wild strawberries on the hill. "Catch me if you can!" Constance cried, and we ran down the wild slope to the lake, the air stirring our hair, so swift was our passage. There, safely out of hearing of the house, we collapsed laughing on the bank. "Wait for me, you little mouse!" I gasped, and retied my hair.

When we had quite caught our breath, "Let us not go back yet, dear New-Mother!" Constance pleaded (the

child seems to think this phrase is my name, and I have not troubled to correct her) and I most graciously agreed.

"Let us see what lies beyond," I said. "You are a fawn and I am a doe, and we will steal through the trees so silently not even the birds will know we approach!"

And so we made our way through the grove of chestnuts cloaking the rise beyond those strange trees that ring the lake—it was the Indians called them 'tamarack', Mister Ransom says; they look somewhat like hemlock but (astonishingly) they are turning colour, and will drop their needles—and Constance was delighted to startle a chattering of squirrels. Beyond the chestnuts was a grove of pine, and beyond that, a little glade—a space no larger than my sitting room surrounded by the great trees towering towards Heaven, the King's arrow still blazed on their trunks.

I see I am evading telling what we found.

We found two graves, each marked with a stone of slate.

The first was clearly marked as that of Elizabeth Pinney.

"Here is your dear mother's grave," I said to Constance, and sank to my knees by the first as if to say a prayer—indeed, I did do so; it would be sacrilege to mock the posture of prayer because of shock . . . because of fright. That my first reaction was *fright* I cannot now say for sure, though it would be logical, I daresay, to be frightened to find one had married a man who not only was a stranger then, but now, after a month of marriage, was even more an Unknown.

"What does it say, New-Mother? Does it give her name?"

"Yes," I said, forcing myself to speak calmly: no need to communicate my fright to the child. "See—here are the letters—" I traced them with my finger—"*Elizabeth Pinney*—and then it gives the dates of her life: the fourth of December, Seventeen Hundred and Eighty-two, to the fifth of January, Eighteen Hundred and Sixteen—that would be when you were born—"

Constance put out her own small finger. "Then there is a '2'!" she cried, delighted. "I can read that! Read the rest, dear New-Mother!"

"'2nd wife to Israel Carson'," I read, my mouth dry.

And I rose and with steady step walked to the other stone. This I did not read aloud.

Johanna Spooner, beloved wife of Israel, in the 20th year of her life, & her infant daughter, born at dawn and dead at sunset, this 12th day of June 1804 Death thou art fowle & I despize thee.

I prayed by Johanna's grave, too, but I fear it was more for myself than for her.

"Who is here?" Constance said curiously.

"Someone for whom your father still grieves," I said, and as I spoke the words aloud I knew them for the truth. I took her by the hand, and as we retraced our steps, I cautioned her to say nothing of what we had found. "It would not be kind," I explained. "Your father does not speak of those he has lost; that means it is too painful for him."

The child gave me a searching look, but said nothing.

So Israel Carson is no longer an unknown to me, a blank. He is a man whose heart is dead, whose heart is buried in the glade in the woods, buried with his 'beloved wife'.

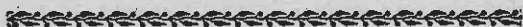
I feel no jealousy of Johanna, for I do not love her Israel. I cannot: where there is no man's heart, there can be no love, to give or to receive. In a way this is a great relief to me, for I have been chastising myself for my failure to live up to my marriage vow: *honour* and *obey* I do, but *love*—no. And now I see why I cannot!

But the knowledge I have gained this day in no way relieves my loneliness, or promises any respite from it. My life looks back at me as do these blank windows. That is all my future holds: coldness, blackness, emptiness. Perhaps if I become with child, Mr. Carson, his procreating duty done, will spare me further expression of my conjugal duty until after I am delivered. This would be a blessed respite . . . I do therefore pray that such condition may soon bring me relief.

And meanwhile ('*meanwhile*'?—time between *what* and *what*, I wonder? between the discovery of Johanna's grave and the necessity for my own?)—*meanwhile* I shall diligently keep my Journal, so that later, turning its pages, I shall be comforted. It will be evidence that the days do pass if one is but patient enough—the days pass, and become weeks, and months, and thus add up to a lifetime.

This Journal will be proof that I, Emelie Stark (I cannot add the 'Carson'—since reading that cry of grief on Johanna's stone, I feel no living woman can be entitled to the name)—I, Emelie Stark, did once exist, did once hope, did once dream.

Chapter Two



When I awoke on that particular Thursday in late September of last year, Tamarack meant nothing to me, and I did not know Justin existed. I thought it merely another day when I would hurry down the steps of my rooming house, afraid of being late, when I would smile and smile at Dillman customers (thin and elegant in tailored tweeds; stalwart and dowdy in hats like galleons, heirloom mink beneath their chins) and somehow conceal my true feelings as I ordered a pink satin pillow for an enceinte poodle, or arranged for glass shelves to be fitted into a Goddard of Newport secretary to hold a collection of Venus's-flytraps, or agreed to provide eighteen linear feet of books, titles immaterial, their bindings to match the stripe on an Empire sofa. And I would loathe myself for my subservience and my hypocrisy.

Time was when I would have protested that the price of such a pillow (a yard square and filled with goose down) would buy clothes and comfort for more than one neglected child—why didn't I speak out now? Why didn't I point out that the world is indeed organized most oddly, if dedicated students must go hungry, yet the dull of mind can buy books by the yard? Because I had to eat, that's why. And pay my rent. And I would remind myself that my job as a very, very junior assistant ("Decorating? Let Dillman's Do It—") was the best I'd been able to get, and I was thankful to have it, wasn't I? True, it wasn't the sort of job I'd aimed for, but after all, I *had* dropped out of college before I received my degree in

Architecture, wasn't that so? And surely I wasn't so naive as to think it made any difference at all—any difference to anyone but me, that is—that I'd been driven to abandon my studies not by sloth, or indifference, or ill health, but by death: death tripled, in a tasteless excess of tragedy.

I honestly don't think I'm any more given to self-pity than most; at any rate, I try to guard against it, and I'd prefer to believe that the dissatisfaction that nagged at me as the day wore on was due not so much to the faults in my character as to a natural restlessness arising from the changing season. Another summer gone, and what had I done with it? New ground cleared? A good harvest in sight? No, and again no. Why I should think in such country terms I do not know; I have always (except in daydreams) lived in town. Perhaps it was the flock of migrating birds chattering on the Common in the noonday heat. Did I, all unaware, share their instinct to be up and away to seek a more suitable nesting ground? What must it be like to be free, if only to dawdle over a lunch hour when one wished, and not have to come scurrying back like a child afraid of being tardy? What must it be like not to rejoice at the closing bell as a release from prison?

Dillman employees do not presume to leave by the main entrance, with its uniformed doorman and its great bronze doors flanked by lemon trees in pottery tubs. Today as always I used the rear elevator, and—zip open my bag for Theft Control; zip it shut—I slipped out the side door onto Tidewall Street. Beneath the layered air the sun shone full in my eyes, and for one heady moment I felt free, as if the hours before me were really mine and would be filled as I wished them filled: with someone waiting, someone to share my supper, my evening, my bed. Then the sun slid behind a building, my illusion of freedom fled with it, and that other shadow, daily more bold, fell into step and linked its arm with mine. I knew its name: its name was Fear.

I crossed to the Common and hurried along the dusty paths, my purse tight under my arm and the strap wound twice around my wrist. What was I afraid of? I didn't know—that was what was so frightening. I was afraid not so much of nothing as of nothingness. It was as if a void lay in wait for me, were trying to swallow me like an insect lured near those damnable carnivorous plants (it

had been the day of the debasement of the Goddard of Newport magnificent mahogany). Of course I knew I was lonely, and loneliness can make one fanciful, create longings one can scarcely bear. I knew my days were empty, my nights more empty still: could that account for this feeling that if I didn't do *something*—I didn't know what—I would vanish . . . evaporate . . . drift away as imperceptibly as smog before a shifting wind?

I paused on the footbridge to watch a swan aloof and arrogant as a duchess in a slum. Perhaps my dread of becoming disembodied was a perfectly normal obsession, I thought, no more than my share of the fear that seeped through the pavement like a rising tide, which crept about the streets as a poisonous fog. There had been a series of those ugly incidents to which Boston seems peculiarly prone—an old man stoned to death, I remember, and a young girl murdered wantonly. But mine was a fear compounded by loneliness, I told myself, which was normal, too. Who was there to miss me were I to disappear? Who was there to mourn me? For more than a year now, no one. Not a soul.

As I neared my rooming house, nothing, I saw, had changed since morning. There was the row of shiny dark plastic sacks stuffed with trash; there was the landlady's youngest, a smudge-faced child about four years old, squatting on the steps. As I approached, he slyly tightened a string attached to the railing.

"Assassin," I said amiably, and stepped over the cord. I hurried up the steps and unlocked the door, checked to make sure the vestibule was empty, and let the outer door slam shut behind me. In the meager light it looked as if someone had been trying to pry open my mail box; the card, *B and E Milne*, had a new gouge. But the lock opened easily enough, and my mail seemed undisturbed: two identical advertising circulars, and a stiff white envelope postmarked Welkin, Vermont and addressed in bold and unfamiliar handwriting to Mrs. Emelie Carson Milne. What! I thought happily—a genuine piece of first-class mail? It must be from Gam; no doubt she asked someone to address it for her. And I tucked it into my purse, to save until I'd be in my own room.

I was halfway up the stairs before it occurred to me it wasn't true I had no one to mourn me: I had Gam. How

could I have forgotten her? Perhaps because she's so old, I thought. One of these days soon I'd be mourning her, no doubt, and I was bone-weary with grieving for those I loved. Although a normal, in-good-season loss it would be, after a long and—what kind of life? Happy? I had no idea. Healthy, anyway—you had to be healthy to have lasted as long as Gam.

Smells of cooking. Smells of lysol. Smells of dust and mildew and of a cat's mistake, hastily wiped up. No one was in the second-floor hall or on the stairs to the third floor or in the cramped third-floor hallway with three locked doors (one-room apartments with angled ceilings, dormer windows like tunnels) and a fourth door half open (clawfoot tub, weeping faucets, sulky toilet, tiles loosening behind the radiator).

I crossed to the door with *Mr. and Mrs. Bardwell Milne* in the brass holder and started to put my key in the lock, but the door swung open as soon as I touched it. I stood there with my key in my hand and not moving, not moving at all. I had owned so little—surely it wasn't necessary to create such chaos, just to sort through my things for something worth stealing!

I backed away, groped for the stairs, turned and fairly flew down to the landlady's apartment at the rear of the first floor. I rang the bell and pounded on the door (the TV was blaring) and I shouted, "Mrs. Blaikson! Please call the police!" And when she came to the door, staring at me as if I were demented: "I've been robbed—my room's been ransacked and I—my things are gone—"

And then I ran back up and into my room—no, not mine, the room wasn't mine any more—and with a strange sick taste in my mouth I gazed around me and what I felt most of all was *dirty*. Someone had broken into where I lived and had pawed over my possessions—had yanked open drawers and dumped the contents on the floor and ripped the blankets off the bed and jerked the mattress up and flung my clothes out of the closet and tipped over my bookcase and knocked my plants from the windowsill—*was everybody in this house deaf? didn't anybody hear what was happening?*—and then, no doubt, stuffed what they wanted, what they thought they might sell—though who would buy it I could not think—into something like huge laundry sacks (the four-year-old as-

sassin on the front steps would later maintain he saw 'no-buddy but them laundry guys' emerge during his vigil there) and then they'd walked on down the stairs and out the front door. Bold as brass, as Gam would say. Carrying with them all my jewelry (Bard's Phi Beta Kappa pin, my mother's rings, the silver butterfly my father brought me from Mexico), my mother's teapot and the dishes we brought back from Canada, when she and my father and I—oh, God! their pictures! In the silver frame on the bureau—gone, of course! Of course!

I crouched down, then, and peered under the bed and saw my suitcase was gone, too—that battered canvas satchel that wouldn't bring two dollars in a junk shop—and with it my parents' letters, and the snapshots I took all through college, of my friends, of the picnic where I'd met Bard . . . My life! Those bastards had stolen my life!

"Mrs. Milne?" It was the landlady hauling herself up the last flight to stand purple-faced in the doorway. "P'lice is here." She looked around. "My Gawd!"

"They were thorough, weren't they?" I said bitterly.

To my surprise, the police were kind. There were two of them, large and Irish, and as I watched them prowling about they seemed like hounds circling for the scent. And then I thought: this is the only place on earth where I have the right to enter without knocking, and now I am a stranger even here.

"When you've got everything listed, drop it off or mail it in," the sandy-haired one said. "Might as well tell you, prob'ly you'll never see any of it."

I nodded. "Thank you." For what? I wondered. For not blaming me for being robbed, I guess.

"When will your husband be home?" They glanced around, as if somewhere in that jumble of stuff not worth stealing there ought to be something belonging to a man, and of course there wasn't.

"Husband! That's a good 'un, that is!" Evidently Mrs. Blaikson blamed me for being robbed.

Irish and no doubt Catholic, I thought rapidly, and said with careful honesty, "My husband is dead. I use his name on the mailbox and on my door because I feel—that is, I *felt* safer. And—and that's why I still wear my wedding ring."

"And who has a better right?" said the sandy-haired one.

Who indeed? I thought. Why, anyone . . . anyone at all.

"You been living here long?"

"Two years," I said. "No—no, it's more like a year and a half." It's more like a thousand years, I thought. It was two years ago I'd married Bard. I had married him in September, I had left him in December, I had filed for divorce in January, and in April . . . in April he had . . . died.

"Maybe you have some men friends now? Somebody who knows you're here by yourself?"

I shook my head. "No," I said. "No . . . friends."

It was true: I had no friends. I'd cut myself off from my old ones, and I'd made no new. I had scrapped my old life; I had—how do they say it?—cut my losses. No, that wasn't right. What I'd done, I saw clearly, was to cut and run: run and hide and lick my wounds; and it seemed to me now, a year and a half later, they had scarcely scabbed over, they were as raw as ever.

"No visitors at all?" They glanced at Mrs. Blaikson.

"No visitors," she said reluctantly. "I'd've known it if she had."

Yes, I thought bitterly, if I'd had a lover you'd have known all about it, but thieves can ransack my room and make off with everything I own, and you don't hear a thing.

I closed the door after them. Groping in my handbag for a pen, I found the letter from Welkin, Vermont. The letter I'd been happy to get, for some reason. I slit open the envelope and glanced at the signature: Justin St. John. The name meant nothing to me. The message, in the same bold yet legible hand, was brief: "Miss Carson has asked me to write you that she would very much like to see you. I would suggest if you intend to comply with her request that you do so at once, as she is exceedingly weak."

It struck me this was not so much a suggestion as a summons. Who was this Justin St. John? A lawyer? A trustee of Années d'Or? It was the duty of Mrs. What's-her-name, the directress, to let me know about Gam's health. "Miss Carson has asked—" Strange, Gam sending

messages out of proper channels, so to speak. Années d'Or wasn't the kind of old people's home where one need sneak out desperate messages via a casual visitor; Gam wasn't an inmate, she was an honored guest, or so it seemed to me whenever I had gone to visit her. Which hadn't been too often, I thought, and felt troubled and ashamed.

I began to pick up my books. A volume of Millay fell open at the flyleaf, and there was Bard's signature, sloping, unformed, almost illegible. "*To Emelie, whom I cannot hold close enough*—" I was blinded by sudden tears. Had he already known? Or was it a peculiarly hellish self-fulfilling prophecy?

I stared at the chaos about me. If only I could escape this wretched room, this treadmill of days, this dirty, desperate city! I would go to Welkin—I would go in the morning—I would phone Dillman's that I couldn't come in, I'd been broken into (and so I had: I myself had been invaded). I would go to Vermont and see Gam, and maybe I would come back, and maybe I wouldn't.

The bus had jolted its way past the maze of new-highway construction on the rim of the city and was rolling smoothly toward the north. Strange, I mused, how one thinks times of boredom or frustration, or loneliness or disappointment or even grief, will go on forever. Yesterday I was smiling and smiling at Dillman customers; today I can wear what expression I please. Yesterday I had to swallow my rage at mutilating that lovely piece of mahogany—what a poisonous woman, all sleek elegance and delicate hands, with her eyelids painted palest mauve and her spun-gold earrings and her spun-gold hair—why had I disliked her so? Because she assumed, merely because she had title to it, that she *owned* that masterpiece and had the right to destroy it, and what's worse, to hire my skills to accomplish her barbarities? Was that all—my artisan's wounded pride—or did I envy her, too? Probably . . . and a nasty degrading emotion it is, envy. I hate money, because I haven't any . . . If I'd had money, I'd have been able to buy help for Bard, somehow. Perhaps, then, I could have saved him from himself. *Or from me . . .*

The sun was brighter now, the sky clearing. I began

watching the license plates we were passing. I'd kept a list of them, I remembered, when we'd first gone west to Ohio. No, it couldn't have been then, I'd've been too young, only five or so. It must have been when we'd driven back to Welkin two or three summers later . . . I tried to recapture what it had been like to be me, snug and safe in the back seat of the car, my father driving, my mother beside him, turning now and then to smile at me, to answer patiently my dozenth, "When, *when* will we get to Gam's?" I had cradled happiness in my arms like a cake for a picnic; I took it for granted I would have my full share. It had seemed to me the natural order of things that my parents were happy together, that they loved each other. I did not know then how rare is happiness, how fragile is love.

LIVE FREE OR DIE—New Hampshire, of course. SEE VERMONT . . . And then we were passing a sleek dark red roadster with Massachusetts plates, and I caught a glimpse of a wing of pale hair beneath a scarf, of slender gloveless hands on the wheel, and a heavy ring with a blood-red stone. I twisted in my seat to look, but I couldn't be sure it was really the Venus of the Flytraps; the driver wore enormous dark glasses that made her look like one of her own victims.

In that astonishing way of landscape here in New England, suddenly the mountains were on either side. Seen this close, there was no grandeur to them; they appeared commonplace, abused. Too many billboards, I thought, too many landfill settlements of pinch-penny houses. Even the forests looked wrung out and used up. I tried to imagine what must be the hand-to-mouth existence of anybody living up one of those small, secretive roads that scurried off into the thin stands of pine. It must have been easier two hundred years ago, when there was plentiful fuel on every side, and game in the woods, and fish in the clear clean waters of the river. Nowadays when a man is poor he hasn't air fit to breathe or water fit to drink. If I'm to eke out a living, I thought, I'll get me out of the city, where only the rich can be cool in summer and warm in winter, where only the rich can have flowers every day, and music or silence as it pleases them. If poor I must be, I vowed—and it looks as if poor I *shall* be!—then I'll be poor where there are wildflowers for the gathering, and

where I need not lock my door. Never lock the door, as Gam never did. . . .

We were making occasional brief detours now into towns lucky enough not to be directly on the throughway but near enough to benefit from it. First the cemeteries with their brick storehouses at the gate, to receive the dead over the winter and keep them safe until the ground thawed in spring; then the tree-shaded streets; then the stores and firehouse and a church or two ranged about the central square, bandstand at one end, neo-Greek post office at the other. I would stare out the bus window and envy the grandmas with purple hair descending to be hugged by becurlered daughters and wary-eyed grandchildren. Life must be pleasant in such a town, I mused. People have names, people have relatives and histories and reputations; everybody knows everybody, and if you take sick and die or something, it is noticed.

Could I earn a living in such a town? If I had to, I supposed I could get a job as a waitress. And I knew how; I'd earned my board that way through school, until I'd married Bard. He wouldn't let me work as a waitress, of course, and I couldn't get other work that would fit into my schedule of classes, and I'd had to borrow for my tuition. Of course we had quarreled. I'd accused him of being stuffy and selfish, and he'd said hotly, "I know how men talk about waitresses! I know how they look at them!" "Pushing me into debt is certainly a queer way of showing I matter to you as a wife!" I retorted. His face went deadly white. Before I had the wit to realize how he might take my words or to stammer an apology, "*Damn you, Emelie,*" he whispered.

My thoughts were an ugly scene behind a half-closed door.

Resolutely, I thought of Gam. Why didn't I visit her more often since I'd come back east? I knew why. Gam was my last link with my childhood. I'd gone that first time in the eager hope it would be like old times, and of course it wasn't. It had been too soon: less than a month after Bard's death, and scarcely six weeks since a morning fog rolling in from Lake Erie had mixed with smoke over the south shore, and somewhere in that hellish tangle of metal and flesh ("Twenty-Six Lose Lives in Multiple Crash") were my mother and father. I couldn't under-

stand now any more than I could then why the horrors that, in a rational world, happen only to strangers had happened to me, to those I loved. *Was that why? Because they were loved by me?* It was absurd, of course, and egotistical in a way, but couldn't it be the truth? If we try to pretend we don't deserve what happens to us, where is the sense in that? Where is the fairness? But then, even if I had done something so awful I deserved to become a widow and an orphan in less than a month, did *they* deserve to die, and die so horribly, just to punish me? What kind of a God would that be, who could be so—so inhuman?

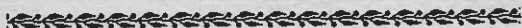
All right, then—what had I done to deserve being robbed? I didn't know. If Gam asked me about it, I wouldn't know what to say. I wouldn't tell her about it: that would be best. I'd pretend everything was wonderful again, or at any rate bearable, and I'd help Gam pretend she wasn't going to stay forever in Années d'Or, she was just visiting, and any day now she'd be going back to the River House, with its pillars and its white clapboards and the gardens running down to the river. . . . That was where I wanted to remember her, that was where I'd pretend we were, not in the choice corner room where she sat waiting for callers, waiting, perhaps impatiently, perhaps in dread, for that ultimate caller who would soon be claiming her.

I was ashamed that I did not know how Gam felt about death. I was ashamed that I had let that second visit, which I had paid solely out of a sense of duty, so disappointed had I been by the first, put me off from trying again. But some busybody—I didn't know who—had seen fit to make sure Gam heard about my divorce, and she had asked questions about Bard that I could not (or would not) answer, and after that it had been easy to think of reasons why I couldn't work in any more visits.

We none of us ever have enough time together, I thought, and stared blindly out as the last of the granite mountains fell away like green and gold waves receding, and the Connecticut River flashed beneath the bridge, and we were in Vermont.

Dear Gam—if she asks me anything this time, I'll tell her whatever she wants to know.

Chapter Three



No doubt the most convenient way to get from White River Junction to Welkin, some thirty miles to the northwest, is to drive; certainly the cheapest is to hitchhike. And then there's the local cab, which will make the run for a flat \$10. I had come prepared to pay the full amount myself; I was in luck, because an elderly couple, in on the New York bus, heeded the driver's "Anybody for Welkin?" and came hurrying over.

"You're sure you don't mind, miss?" The man appeared to be in his seventies, and had hands like cork.

"I'd be delighted," I smiled, and moved over to make room. His wife sat next to me, clutching a large pocket-book to her ribs as if she thought me a pickpocket of peculiar genius. We all gazed out at the ribbon of grass bordering the highway as if we found it intensely interesting. You could do a sketch of us and call it *Distrust of Strangers*, I thought, amused, or perhaps *Three Yankees, Unintroduced*.

The driver broke the silence. "Back sooner than you expected?"

"A bit," the husband admitted.

"Not bad news, is it?"

By way of reply they both stared at the back of his neck.

We were bypassing a valley where poplars fringed the fields with gold. Surely I had known days like this in my childhood, when the sky had been this piercing blue, the greens of meadow and forest as varied and distinct, the solitary maples as gaudy, but I could not recall ever drinking in the color as I was now.

We had left the throughway and were almost over the mountain into Welkin when the wife coughed apologetically. "You still chargin' ten dollars?"

"Haven't raised it yet," the driver said.

"I thought mebbe you'd lowered it." Dryly.

The driver caught my eye in the mirror and winked. "That'd be the day, that would."

She opened her pocketbook and withdrew some folded bills. Of these she set aside a five and a one. Then she took out a worn pouch with a clasp like crossed fingers. She shook out a few coins and selected two quarters and two dimes. "Here," she said to me, "this is our share, two thirds of ten dollars."

"I owe you four pennies," I said, and opened my coin purse.

"Don't take it, Grace," said her husband. "I never could stand to see women haggle over money."

I said firmly, "Actually I ought to pay half and you pay half—you're a family unit, and I—I'm a unit, too."

"That makes no sense," the wife said. "And William, you stay out of this." She took the four pennies and contemplated them. Then she handed one back. "We owe six dollars and sixty-six cents and two-thirds," she said.

Grace . . . William. They'd be coming, if Gam was very ill. I said cautiously, "It's been a long time, but I can't help wondering—didn't you work for my grand-aunt, Miss Carson?" They swiveled their heads to gaze at me, and I was sure I was right. "I'm Emelie, don't you remember me?"

Obviously they did not. Or, rather, like Gam, they remembered the child I'd been. But they hadn't changed that much, I thought; from fifty-five to seventy (or whatever they were now) there may be a certain shrinking, a settling, like an old house under a weight of snow, but essentially one is the same person.

"Emelie Carson!" Grace said. "Well, I never!"

"I'm Emelie Milne now," I said. "I've been married." Which was, I thought, the careful truth.

We pulled up in front of the Welkin Inn. William creaked his way out of the cab and helped his wife descend, and then me.

"We meet again at a sad time, Mrs. Milne."

"Perhaps Miss Martha isn't as ill as they say."

"She's very old," William said simply. "Nothing lives forever."

We nodded and smiled at each other and I had turned

away when Grace said, "Oh, Miss Emelie—if you should be wanting anyone to help, I hope you'll think of us."

"Why, thank you," I said. "That's very kind of you."

What an odd way to put it, I thought; it sounds more like an application for employment than an offer to help at a time of death in the family. As if I might ever have need of a cook and a gardener!

The square was lined with cars with out-of-state licenses, and the little café was crowded. It was nearly two o'clock and I was hungry. By the time I'd found a place in a booth and had ordered, been served, and eaten the Salad Plate Special (\$2.75 incl. Bev., Meal Tax and Gratuities Extra), it was after three. I was anxious to see Gam and now felt fortified for the ordeal, but I thought it only prudent to reserve a room first.

The Welkin Inn had been fully booked for over two weeks. Perhaps a bed could be located in a private home. There was a facility set up under the auspices of the Congo Church, a kind of rescue mission for unwary tourists; they'd phone if I liked. With my luck it would be futile, I thought, but no, there was one bed left, in the home of Mrs. Vale Whittaker, 45 High Street, and I could have it for five dollars. If I wanted to be sure of it, I'd best go around and sign in.

Mrs. Whittaker was not at home. Her son, a lad of about fourteen, showed me where I was to sleep, on a cot in a room with twin beds. Two suitcases were propped on the chairs.

"Couple of schoolteachers from Connecticut." Seeing me hesitate, he added, "*Women* schoolteachers." And flushed scarlet.

I said with dignity, "I'm lucky to have this, I know."

I paid the five dollars, which seemed a bit high for the privilege of perching on a narrow cot in a room shared with strangers. I'm getting a very miserly turn of mind, I thought as I hurried back down High Street. A natural result of constriction of the purse strings, no doubt, but unpleasant to live with. It must be fun to tip the waitress lavishly, or to go into a florist shop and say, "I'll take half a dozen of these and a dozen of those—" Oh, darn! I hadn't any flowers for Gam, and I did hate to go empty-handed!

I crossed the bridge over the North Fork and there was

the River House. How strange to be going right on by, taking long, dignified, grown-up steps; how strange not to turn in and go skipping up the walk! The door was ajar—someone must be living there. Had Gam sold the house? What if I were to knock and beg for flowers from the garden? Perhaps there would be late roses still—those red and white ones, York and Lancaster—a name like a bugle call . . . I did not have the courage to ask.

The lobby in *Années d'Or* had fresh flowers in half a dozen vases and magazines strewn in careful disarray on the coffee tables. The matron wasn't in. Could her assistant help?

"I'd like to see Miss Carson, if I may," I said. "I'm Emelie Milne, her niece. Her grandniece." Actually, her great-grandniece, I thought, but that sounds like boasting.

"Come this way, please, *Miss Milne*." She walked as if her undergarments were starched. "*Miss Carson* has been moved to the infirmary, you know."

I said painfully, "No, I didn't know."

Gam had said, the last time I'd visited, "Yes, I'm still in my own room, Emelie, so you can know from that I'm not dead yet, nor near to it. They take you to the infirmary when they expect you'll be dying." The infirmary had its separate entrance, with the drive out of sight of the main building. "Handier for the hearse to arrive with a modicum of tact," Gam had said dryly.

Now she lay motionless on the high bed. The skin was tight against the bones of her face; I could not tell if she was breathing.

"Don't stay too long," my guide remarked in an everyday voice. "We're very tired today." And she left us alone.

"Why, Emelie," Gam said, and smiled at me. "You came after all!"

"As soon as I heard you wanted me," I said huskily. I pulled a chair to the bed and sat down, and took her hand in mine. Her fingers were so fragile I was afraid of breaking them. It's as if she's begun to evaporate, I thought, as if her body is already leaving her. "Oh, Gam," I said shakily, "I love you so!"

"I know you do, Emelie," Gam said. "You are like me—you know how to love."

Did I? I didn't think I did. And what did she mean—whom had she loved? Then, because I couldn't help it, I

thought: *will it ever be like this for me—alone, cared for by strangers, no one to hold my hand or sit by me but someone else's child?*

"Emelie," Gam said, "there's something I want you to do for me. I want to go home again, but they won't let me. You go for me—will you do that?"

"Of course, Gam."

"Once I thought I'd live there always. You be my eyes, Emelie—go and look for me, go and listen. Listen hard with all your heart, then come back and tell me what you hear. There's things to be heard at Tamarack, Emelie . . . things to be heard . . ."

"Tamarack?" I said, bewildered. "You don't mean the River House?"

Gam stared at me. "Home—the River House? Of course not! Tamarack is home to me! The River House was never home—I lived there over seventy years, but it was never, never home." Then, fretfully: "Henry pushed me out of Tamarack—I thought you knew."

I wished I had listened, as a child, to the gossip around me. There had been talk, as there always is in families, I suppose, but I had sensed something ugly in the stories whispered over my head, in the conversations that stopped as I entered a room; and ugliness which has to be hidden had frightened me then (as it frightens me now), and I had pretended that nobody was talking about anything, and therefore the anything (whatever it was) didn't exist. Now it seemed to me that both times we came back to visit, when I was eight and again when I was ten, there had been a good deal about Tamarack, and funerals there, and something about the wrong people dying, a phrase that had troubled me. But I had never gone to Tamarack. The funerals were for relatives I had never seen, and I had been spared attending.

I said, "Henry—you mean my granduncle? I don't think I ever saw him. Wasn't Tamarack his?"

"Your *great*-granduncle," Gam said. "My half-brother. I hated him, and he detested me." The color had risen under her skin; her voice was stronger. "Henry," she said, and her eyes glittered, "had no more right to Tamarack than a—a woodchuck. It should have been Luke's, and when Luke died, it should have been mine." She paused, and I reflected that hatred is an effective stimulant, better

than digitalin perhaps, though no doubt just as lethal in an overdose. "Now remember what I'm telling you, Emelie. It doesn't do to have things forgotten."

"I'll remember, Gam," I said.

"My mother died when I was five years old, and my father married again the same year, married Agathe, a duPré, and she was a French Protestant, which isn't all that much better than a Catholic, if you ask me. Henry was born the following year, and Antoinette four years later. Toinette founded Années d'Or, so I suppose there was some good in the duPré line after all. We can live here for nothing, the Carsons can—it's in the deed. The best accommodations and for free, remember that, Emelie."

Through stiff lips, I said I would.

"Yes, don't forget. For as long as you need to. . . . So *then*, when I was twenty-three, my father died, and I loved Tamarack, and he left it to Henry, every bit of it, and Henry though he wasn't yet eighteen was as vicious as a snake, he told me to move my things out. I could have the River House, he said. Why not? said I. He needn't pretend he was being generous, said I. The River House had been my mother's, at any rate it had been built by her father, so why shouldn't I have it? He'd already disinherited Luke, so who else was there to have the River House but me?"

I could not follow. "Who, Gam?" I said. "Who disinherited Luke? Your grandfather who built the River House?"

"No, no," she said impatiently. "My father—Ismay Carson—who else would disinherit his own son? And because I stood up for Luke, he never forgave me. Ismay Carson never forgave anyone, once he got it into his head you'd gone against him. He took after his grandfather, old Israel—he's the one that built Tamarack. Israel Carson hadn't a forgiving bone in his body, and Ismay was just like him."

"But what did your brother Luke do, Gam? To get himself disinherited, I mean."

"He married Catherine O'Reilly," Gam said, "that's what he did. Catherine O'Reilly wasn't good enough for a Carson. She was a Catholic and the Carsons had been Protestants since long before Cromwell. That was bad

enough, but worse—much worse, I suspected—she was the daughter of one of those just-over-from-Ireland nobodies who were pushing the railroad up the valleys, and the Carson men, Emelie, are terrible snobs when it comes to marriage. I was about fifteen, I think, when Luke came home, dragging Catherine by the hand, and told his father she was carrying his child and he aimed to marry her. I said Luke was doing the honorable thing and a Carson ought not to be ashamed of that, and my father said I was just like my mother, never knew enough not to meddle.” Gam’s voice trembled; a lifetime later, her father’s words still stung.

“He meant you had spirit,” I said.

“Much good it did. He drove Luke away, just the same, and Henry drove me away, you can’t call it anything else.”

“How could he do that, Gam, if Henry wasn’t even eighteen, as you said? I should think he wouldn’t have the legal right.”

“I don’t remember all the ins and outs of it now,” Gam said. “Ismay—that was my father—he made my step-mother Agathe Henry’s guardian, I believe that was it, and she absolutely doted on Henry. I’ve always thought I was lucky all he wanted was to pack us off to the River House—myself and the baby. If he’d said to smother us in our sleep, I daresay she would have done it.”

Was her mind wandering? “What baby, Gam?” I said.

“Why, Luke’s baby,” Gam said, as if I were dull-witted. “The one I’ve been telling you about—his and Catherine’s. Of course he wasn’t a baby then, but I’d had the care of him since he was born, and I tell you, Emelie, I loved him as if he was my own. His name was Luke, too—that would be your grandfather, don’t you see? My brother Luke’s son.”

I said, “But where was your brother all this time?”

Gam’s fingers plucked at the counterpane. “Dead,” she said at last. “He died of the fever before ever the baby came. And Catherine—she came crawling back to my father for help, because she had nothing, and my father told her she could stay at Tamarack until the baby was born, and then she was to go away and never come back, and he would give her enough money to get well away, but she was to leave her baby with him if it was a boy, be-

cause after all it would be a Carson. So that's what she did, Emelie—she sold her baby—what else could you call it? But what else could she do? She had no people of her own, and no learning. She was pretty, that's all. She went away and I never heard what happened to her until long after, but never mind about that now."

Her eyes closed and her expression became impatient, as if she waited for some laggard to catch up. Then, raising her lids as if the effort were almost too much for her, she looked to see if I were still there.

"I don't know why it is, Emelie, but hating at Tamarack always goes too far . . . not like in other families that know when to stop. I loved Tamarack so, I would have shared it with Henry in spite of everything. But he knew what he wanted . . . he wanted me out . . . so when I was twenty-three and young Luke about eight—yes, he was eight—we packed up our things and moved to the River House, and there I stayed until they came and said I had ought to come to *Années d'Or* . . ." She turned her head restlessly, and I held the glass of water for her. "I said no, I wasn't ever going to leave the River House except to go back to Tamarack. But Henry lived on and on and *on*, he didn't die until five years ago, too late for me. He *knew* it was too late. He was dying when they sent for me, and he said—he was laughing and kind of choking on his laughter—he said, 'Well, Martha, you haven't been here to Tamarack for seventy years, have you? Except for funerals. I bet I'd outlive you, and I almost have. Now you can have Tamarack, and be damned to you.'

"That's right, Henry," I said. "I've come to Tamarack only for funerals. Four of 'em, counting Donnet Mansfield's. They don't leave you much choice," I said, "so I see no call to thank you."

"I could leave Tamarack to Gordon," he said.

"Gordon's a fool," I said, "and you'd be a bigger fool if you did. Tamarack wouldn't last two years, he'd sell it acre by acre—anything to make a dollar. He'd break off pieces of the house and hawk 'em on the street corner if he had to."

"Merrill, then," he said, watching me like a cat with a chipmunk, to see which way I'd jump.

"That would be natural,' I said. 'Why don't you? I'm too old to live there now.'

"That's just why I'm going to do it,' Henry said, as if he was licking the honey spoon. 'If I can think of you having Tamarack all to yourself at last, but too old to enjoy it, Martha, too *old*—it makes me die happy!'

"I wish you joy of it then,' I said.

"I thought all that might have been just talk, to get my hopes up; it'd be just like Henry. But when he died, it turned out he *did* leave me Tamarack after all. However, not the furniture, as I suppose you know. Well, then, Merrill proved to be a true granddaughter of Henry's, all right; she fought the Will on the grounds he must have been daft to leave Tamarack to someone too old to have any use for it, and the upshot of that was, the Will wasn't cleared nor the estate settled until two years ago, and I never did go back to Tamarack as the one who had the right to be there. So I haven't rightly seen it since I was your age, child, and that was a long, long time ago. . . ."

Her breath came shallowly, the rise and fall of her chest scarcely moving the counterpane. Then, in a voice just above a whisper, she said, "I've been hanging on until you got here, Emelie. I want to see Tamarack through your eyes."

I said, "Would you like me to go right away, tonight, Gam?"

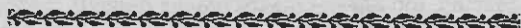
"Don't be silly!" she said tartly. "It'll be dark soon. Go in the morning—first thing in the morning."

I bent over and kissed her cheek. She smelled faintly of lavender, like folded linen. At the door I hesitated, then looked back. Gam was gazing after me with a look that wrenched my heart. As if she envied me . . . And why not? I'm twenty-three, I thought. She was twenty-three the last time she was home.

"Gam," I said unsteadily, "I know it's absurd, but I don't know where Tamarack is."

"Ask Dixon Mansfield," Gam said, and closed her eyes.

Chapter Four



As I left Années d'Or and the windows in all the houses glowed golden behind drawn shades, once again I thought *I have nowhere I may come in without knocking, where I belong*. And then I returned to the café and had a Hot Beef Sandwich Plate (Mashed Potatoes and Bev. incl. \$3.25), recklessly tipped the waitress seventy-five cents, and felt better.

Welkin's telephone listings occupy three pages in a phone book no larger than a digest magazine. I looked up Dixon Mansfield, put through a call, introduced myself, and received a cordial invitation to dinner. Taken aback, I explained I had just finished.

"Then do join me in a postprandial sherry," he said, and gave me directions how to find his house.

The door was opened by Dixon Mansfield himself. Like his house, he was small, elegant, expertly put together, and well preserved for his age. He invited me in with a courtliness that reminded me of the gardener William, although Mr. Mansfield appeared to be somewhat younger and was, of course, more polished in manner. It was pleasant, I thought as I accepted a glass of sherry, to have someone making a gentle fuss over me.

"So you're Emelie. I need hardly say I wouldn't have known you."

I smiled and said, "My grandaunt would like me to go to Tamarack for her. She said you would tell me how to get there."

At this he regarded me with alert inquisitiveness. "As her lawyer, I of course have the keys. That is, Fenwick has one set, I the other. He's had no difficulty renting the River House, but Tamarack is quite another matter. No electricity laid on, you know, and no central heating. Henry Carson was a skinflint, wouldn't spend a nickel he

didn't have to, but still he didn't manage to hang onto his money. When it ran out, he seemed to take pleasure in the fact that Tamarack was getting run down. 'It'll cost Martha a pretty penny to put things to rights here!' he told me. It occurred to me he resented the sound way she handled her investments. Didn't think a woman should have that kind of brain, I suppose. And of course the house is as empty as a drum, what with Henry leaving the furnishings the way he did. They're still in storage, you know, and will be, I'm afraid, until we locate the other heirs. *If any, of course.*"

"Why didn't he leave the furniture to Aunt Martha?"

"That would have been obliging of him, which wasn't Henry's way. No, he left the contents of the house to the heirs of Catherine O'Reilly—that would be your great-grandmother, my dear."

I said, "Gam was telling me about her."

"Then you see the difficulty." He tipped more sherry into my glass. "Catherine may have married again. It's all so long ago. Your grandfather was born posthumously in January of 1897, and Catherine was gone from Tamarack within a month. We've been unable to trace her, and so, my dear, *when* your father can expect his share I could not say. Meanwhile, everything is in storage, and the estate must bear the expense. Frankly, there have been times when I've almost wished Henry Carson had died intestate."

I said painfully, "My parents are dead, Mr. Mansfield. They were killed in a car smash over a year ago."

"Oh, I *am* sorry," he said, almost mechanically, as people do when they hear about someone else's tragedy. "That makes you heir to his share. Someone should have let me know."

"I'm afraid that's my fault," I said. "I—things were in an awful muddle, my husband died, too—I don't know if you knew—anyway, I s-sold what I had to and paid up their bills—they were renting a house so it wasn't too complicated—"

"My dear, didn't you have any legal advice?"

"Oh, yes, my father had a lawyer and all that. That's where I'm storing everything, until I know where I want it—at the lawyer's house, I mean—he's being very kind. If you don't have very much, it's s-simpler when you die.

And my father was very neat and methodical, everything was sorted just so . . ." I stared at the deep amber of the wine and willed my eyes to stay dry.

"I call that very considerate of other people," Dixon Mansfield said. "A rare trait in a Carson—a Carson male, that is. Let us hope we soon determine one way or the other whether Catherine had other descendants. Fenwick tells me none of the furniture is the better for being in storage. He's not one of her heirs, of course, being—good gracious, let me see, what relationship does Gordon Fenwick have to you? Grandson of Antoinette, who was your great-grandfather's half-sister—well, not a close relationship, surely! Third cousin once removed, perhaps. Do you know him?"

I confessed I could not recall ever meeting Gordon Fenwick. I did not add that Gam thought him a fool and had told her brother Henry so; then why, I wondered, was he Gam's agent?

"Fenwick is in real estate," Mr. Mansfield was saying. "He was most fortunate, some years ago, to have at his disposal his father-in-law's acreage, an excellent start, I must say, *most* propitious." He sat there, tapping the tips of his fingers together and chuckling. Then he rose. "Excuse me a moment, my dear, while I get those keys."

I wondered if Dixon Mansfield always indulged himself thus freely in these encapsulated comments, smooth on the outside, tart within. It was an odd trait in a lawyer. Still and all, I couldn't help liking Dixon Mansfield.

Returning, he handed me two keys and escorted me to the door. I thanked him once again for his hospitality, and I said, "Mr. Mansfield, I'm afraid I still don't know where Tamarack is."

"On the far side of Welkin Hill, about five miles to the southeast of here. You don't have a car? Ken Kendall runs a taxi service when the mood seizes him. Tell him I recommended him—perhaps that will encourage him to keep his charges within reason."

It turned out that my five dollars for the cot included coffee and rolls in the morning, so it was in a considerably mollified frame of mind that I set out to bargain with Ken Kendall for transportation to Tamarack. Mr. Kendall, a lean man with an active Adam's apple and an inquisi-

tive nose, agreed to drive me there and back for two dollars. "Damn that muffler," he shouted as we went out of town with a subdued roar. "They salt the roads winter and summer and it rusts the hell out of your car. I'm not doing you any favor, or Dixon Mansfield either. Five miles out, five miles back, at twenty cents a mile I'm more'n breaking even, right? Call me Ken, everybody does." He swerved to avoid tail-ending a foliage-viewer. "I have to see Deese Ransom anyway, been meanin' to drive out for a month now, line me up a coon hunt. So it's kill two birds, see what I mean?"

It was a lovely morning. The soft early light lay muted over the blocks of standing corn not yet bleached by frost; the poplars gleamed along the shallow river bed, and as the mist steamed off the fields, the cattle stood motionless, stupefied by the unexpected warmth. We passed the four corners of Ransom's Bridge, where a one-room schoolhouse, unpainted and empty-eyed, slumped against the woods, and *D. Ransom, Gen'l Merch.* hung aslant over the steps to the general store. There was a cluster of trailers just beyond; ragamuffin children hunched in the dust and stared as we went by. I waved, but no one waved back.

Then we were off the blacktop. Beyond Ransom's Brook the road, one-car wide and washboarded, plunged through the woods and climbed the ridge, giving a glimpse of mountains blue-gray against the sky. Another tenth of a mile and we turned onto a lane like a log-cutting trail; it couldn't have been used lately, for the bright leaves like scattered flower petals lay as they had fallen, uncrushed and undisturbed.

We hadn't gone a hundred yards when we came upon a great birch blocking the way. "Come down in that humdinger of an ice storm we had in April, I bet," Ken said. "It's not more'n a quarter of a mile from here—want me to come with you?"

I assured him I could clearly see where the lane went.

"I didn't think you were about to get lost. I just wondered if maybe you'd get all nerved up, a city girl and all."

I laughed. "What's to be afraid of when you're alone?"

"Okay, then—I'll go see if that bitch of Deese's has

whelped yet. Best damn coon dog you ever did see. Want I should meet you back here in a couple of hours?"

I said I doubted it would take me that long.

"Don't hurry on my account," Ken said with an easy familiarity at which it was impossible to take offense.

I clambered over the stricken birch and started up the lane. It was good to be reminded there is still a part of the world where not to be afraid is the normal state, where men's nocturnal pursuits are coon hunts, where a man is judged by the quality of his dog. I don't want to go back, I thought: triple-lock the door, cringe at shadows, dread every stranger. Boston is a prison.

Here on this lonely road I had nothing to fear. I was alone yet not alone; I had all those who came before me for company. Past these very trees they went, over this shelving rock—*my kinfolk*, and what comfort is in the word! Gam must have run down this lane on her way to school, skipped down it to meet her brother Luke returning from Welkin, strolled along it with her nephew, my grandfather, clutching her hand. Had Luke fled this way, dragging his reluctant bride, Ismay Carson shouting curses and threats after them? Or had the parting been deadly courteous, manners on the tongue and murder in the heart? And Gam stumbling after, sobbing, "*Luke! Cathy! Wait—wait for me!*" Luke, impatient yet gentle: "You can't come with us, Martha, you silly goose—we're going to be married . . ."

The silence and the beauty of the woods reached me then, spoke to me, soothed me, and I forgot Ken, and Boston, and Gam, even. I looked about me, and I was in the immediate present, walking with no ghosts, living or dead; I was really and truly by myself, and what I felt was an extraordinary peace.

Along either side of the lane lay great tumbled stones, stained with lichen or cloaked in moss and fern; some were truly enormous, weighing, I supposed, a ton or more. At one time they must have made a proper stone wall, but now they were jumbled about by sapling birch and hemlock. Beyond them lay the forest, a symphony of scarlet, gold, and gray, being for the most part maple; once a stand of russet beech stood poised like dancers at the barre. And everywhere the ground was concealed by a carpet of ferns, or mosses, a tangle of spent wildflowers,

or a thicket of blackberry. Nowhere was there that raw, scraped, invaded look one sees where new housing has gone up, or new roads thrust through. If man had ever done injury here, it had long since been healed by time.

Over all lay silence warm and thick as a comforter. I stopped to listen: I could discern no more than the faintest rustle, the merest whisper of frond or leaf beneath the languid stirring of the multiscented air. It was so still it seemed I could hear my own blood move . . . Somewhere a bluejay shrieked. I hurried on.

Now I thought I must be getting near. The woods were thinning and I could see more sky ahead. The road traced a narrow passage through what might once have been an orchard. By the sparse fruit clinging stubbornly, now and again I could identify an ancient apple tree; almost always it would be disfigured by dead branches thrust forth naked as bones from a wound. Pines had sprung up, choking the trees, and so thick was this growth a dozen deer could hide in there or a child be lost, I was thinking uneasily, when the lane skirted a hump of ground and I came without warning upon an open space. There above me, not fifty yards away, stood Tamarack.

The sun, scarcely three hours into the sky—it was nearly ten o'clock by now, but still 'summer time'—shone full in my eyes, and the shadow of the house stretched down to me across the spatter-dash of fallen leaves, the long streaks that were the chimneys reaching almost to my feet, like a hand raised in welcome . . . or in warning. I stood amazed. Why had no one, by hint or suggestion, prepared me for Tamarack's size, its strength, its dignity? Perhaps it would not have been so impressive had it been built at another time or in another place; but for a house erected less than a decade after Vermont entered the Union, and built not in Portsmouth or Boston or on the Delaware or the James, but here on this lonely mountain, and built, moreover, of brick—well, it was a pure astonishment!

There must once have been a carriage drive to the door; if so, the blown leaves of several years had buried it. The lane, disdaining to climb the knoll, curved away to follow the edge of the woods and disappear behind the maples standing like a guard of honor to the northeast. With the sun in my eyes I could not see as clearly as I

wished, so I went along the lane until I was opposite the central door (no doubt the 'Main Door, North' of Dixon Mansfield's keys), and there I gazed at the full sweep of the house, with a critical . . . with an approving . . . with a delighted eye. Israel Carson surely had built well!

It was an imposing structure mostly in the Federal style, with a handsome Adam doorway and a Palladian window; the massive brick gables, each with two hooded chimneys, thrust boldly above the roofline. On either end wings were set back slightly; these were also two-storied, but of somewhat smaller proportions, so that the effect was to 'tie the house to the ground', as the landscape architects put it. Perhaps Israel Carson himself was an architect, I thought, or perhaps he 'dabbled in architecture', as men of education did in those days, employing journeymen artisans who brought with them books and drawings of the finest homes being built down country.

I felt a stirring of curiosity about this remote ancestor of mine. Until yesterday I had known very little of family history; my parents, as I have said, moved away from Welkin before I was six, too young to have acquired the Vermont knack of memorizing the chain of kinship unto the furthest link. I could not remember my father ever referring to his antecedents other than that one time when, plagued more than usual by overdue 'statements of account', he had remarked rather acidly that if only his grandfather had managed not to get himself disinherited, they (my parents) would be living now in "Israel Carson's Tamarack," to which my mother had replied serenely, "It doesn't matter, Charles." I had been told, of course, that we were all descended from this Israel Carson, a tough and ambitious man presumably of Puritan descent who had made his way into Vermont in the 1790's, but where he came from, or why he left, no one seemed to know. He had bought several hundred acres of mountain land, too rocky for tillage and too sour for pasture, and he had built himself this house called Tamarack. But Israel Carson could never have stood, as I was standing, to gaze at his newly completed dwelling with surprised delight. It was obvious that Tamarack had not been built all at one time, but piecemeal, and over a period of years.

What was now the west wing must have been erected

first. Its style was Georgian, its plan a modest half-Cape: two twelve-over-twelve windows flanking the Bible door, and the chimney in the outer gable. I recalled that such a cautious method of building had been common in the eighteenth century: begin with half a house, if that were all one could afford, and finish it when more prosperous. If my ancestor had not chosen to build so ambitiously of brick, but had relied instead on wood, plentiful and cheap, no doubt he could have started with a proper house, a full Cape with a central chimney. As things turned out, he must have been well satisfied with his choice, for by the time he was ready to expand, Israel Carson obviously could do himself proud. The lavish use of arches in the brickwork, the elegance of design and perfection of detail in door and window, cornice and balustrade—all proclaimed the work to have been commanded by a man of wealth. And the chimneys, six in all—two at either end of the main house, one in the gable of each wing—where had he got the money? I would ask Gam.

The east wing was obviously an afterthought. Its bricks were less tawny, more rose; there was a Victorian flamboyance to the exposed brackets under the eaves, in themselves more Gothic than Georgian. But did that matter? A house ought not to be frozen in Time. What does not grow, and change, dies.

A platoon of milkweed had invaded halfway to the house; its bursting pods were silver in the sunlight. I started up the slope. The faint sounds of the forest fell away and it was very still, so still the slight scuffling of my feet in the leaves seemed unnaturally loud. I caught myself trying to move more quietly, as if I were afraid of making an unseemly noise where someone lay dying.

Now as I drew near I could see that Tamarack had indeed been callously abandoned. It wasn't so much the matted grass where there should be a walk, or the faded goldenrod sprawled across the shallow steps—such things could quickly be put to rights. Nor was it the paint on doorjamb and windowsill, chipped, peeling, blotched with mildew. It was those windows, blank and staring like eyes of the dead no one has troubled to close: it was they that gave Tamarack that look of desolation, of having been

cast off, too old to be any longer useful, to die conveniently out of sight, untended and unloved.

A single stalk of asters leaned aslant the lowest step. On an impulse I snapped the brittle stem; its stiff bouquet was like the offerings coerced children thrust at visitors. Holding the purple spray across the crook of my arm, I selected the proper key and fitted it into the lock. I would enter as the bride of Israel Carson—the bride for whom he must have built this house.

The door swung inward, and sunlight streamed toward me from the far end of the hall. Of a sudden, I was reluctant to go in, I could not have said why. Dark against the dazzle of light a staircase curved upward. Someone had tracked mud on its treads, I saw, but not recently; as my eyes adjusted, I could see even the mud had its coat of dust. Like an accusing finger, the light probed every leaf-cluttered corner, betrayed the presence of an elaborate spiderweb, and pointed out a long crack in the paneling of a door. I still did not move to enter. Unfair, I thought, that the house, old and vulnerable, should be defenseless against the uninvited, even such an authorized intruder as I, frivolous with flowers.

From Luke, to Luke, to Charles, to me . . . I had *ought* to be invited! I tossed away my flowers. I would enter Tamarack not as the bride of a Carson, nor even as Gam, whose eyes I had promised to be. I would enter as myself, Emelie, come home at last; and I stepped across the threshold apologetically, unsure of my welcome.

Chapter Five



The main house was laid out conventionally for its period, and this had the not unexpected result of making me feel less a stranger. I had often, as a student, admired just such a spacious central hall lined with deeply paneled doors, and in my imagination walked through similar pairs

of rooms connected by wide archways. But the houses that illustrated my textbooks had been kept in a fine state of polish; it is something else, I found, to pull open those handsome doors and hear the hinges shriek, to tread upon gritty, unpolished floorboards instead of fine carpets, to observe mouse droppings in a denuded cupboard and the tracks of some small animal in the scatterings of ash on a hearth.

The rooms immediately to my left and right as I entered were cool and shadowy, the two on the south flooded with sunlight; yet there was a sameness about these empty, echoing rooms that I found disquieting. It wasn't so much that they appeared all of a size, large and nearly square, each with a fireplace centered on the far wall and flanked by a (locked) door leading, presumably, into the adjacent wing; nor was it the way the paneling above the chair rail repeated its design from one room to the next, as if someone of limited imagination had said, "I like that, I'll take four, please." No, more likely it was the monotony of neglect these rooms displayed: the paint on the panel moldings chipped and dingy, the swirls of plaster ribbon festooning the ceilings smudged with soot, every door edge and window rail daubed with grimy fingerprints. Henry Carson hadn't even troubled to hire a competent cleaning woman. What could I say to Gam? That Tamarack looks as if Henry hated it, too?

The house, too long shut, had a stale, cold-stone/mortar smell. I unlocked the door at the south end of the hall and flung it open. Stepping out, I was embraced by sunlight on a wide sweep of terrace. Woodbine tumbled in a scarlet torrent over the low wall, and the terrace itself was a tapestry of gray-green slate stitched together with witchgrass, plantain, chickweed, dusty rosettes of dandelion and tufts of upland asters long since gone to seed. I wished I had time to discipline the grapevine that smothered the west wing to the eaves, from which point it vaulted over the slate roof to the main house balustrade and now was sending feelers to explore the Palladian window overhead. That makes two of them, I thought, suitably impressed, and hoped there was a splendid view both to the north and the south, to justify such lavish duplication.

Had there once been a garden below the terrace? I

could not tell. Pines had invaded the wilderness of golden-rod and pasture rose and hid what lay at the bottom of the slope—possibly a brook, for the land rose again to a ridge that seemed, here on the south, not more than half a mile away. This nearness of the cradling hills gave the house an almost tangible feeling of seclusion—an island of stillness in an ocean of turmoil and strife. Was it this silence that Gam wanted me to hear? Did she know how thirsty I was for such restorative quiet, this sweetness of *no sound* . . . Not quite nothing, to be sure: somewhere a bee was droning, drunk on sunshine, and a catbird jabbered at me from a russet pear tree. "You hush," I said. "I'll have you know I was *asked* to come."

The door from the terrace into the Victorian wing was locked. Its single pane and the narrow windows beyond were so flyspecked I could barely see in. There were two rooms: the first, empty except for a dark shade pulled halfway down, was exceedingly gloomy; the second had a window to the east as well as to the south, and I could see a small fireplace in black marble cramped across one corner. Perhaps it was the tight-shut doors, but both rooms looked mean and secretive—nothing here, I should have thought, to make an old, old woman ache with longing to return.

I retreated to the west wing. Its door, too, was locked. Peering in, I made out a flight of stairs leading up into the dark. Some five feet to the left of them was a wall covered from floor to ceiling with empty shelves, forming a pantry, which appeared to run the full depth of the house, for there was daylight at the far end. Immediately to my left a door stood slightly ajar; I could not see past it into the room beyond.

I went further along the terrace, then, and parting the stubborn vine, I cupped my hands about my eyes against the wavy glass.

There was just the one room, very large and shadowy. Although it had windows on three sides, here on the south they were curtained by the grapevine, and the two on the west, flanking a huge fireplace, were also obscured by some sort of rampant growth. There were pots and a kettle on the black-iron stove and books and a bowl of apples on the trestle table nearby. A cluster of furniture was

against the north window, and, beneath where I stood, a narrow bed was covered with a quilt.

If I'd been Goldilocks, I couldn't have been more astonished . . . or uneasy. Why hadn't Gam said anything? Or Dixon Mansfield? Obviously someone was making unauthorized use of Tamarack! Why on earth didn't Gam's agent—what's his name, Gordon Something—Fenwick—why didn't *he* keep an eye on the place?

An exceedingly vigorous and lush thicket of raspberry barricaded the windows on the west. I beat a painful retreat, re-entering the house from the terrace and emerging by the north door, whence I circled round over the ruined lawn to the west wing.

The first window gave on a small lavatory. It had an old-fashioned pull-chain toilet and a washstand with pitcher and bowl, towels hanging from rods, soap in a dish. No fly-by-night intruder this! I thought, and moved to the kitchen window.

Here the glass had been scrubbed clean and shiny. Directly within was a table, slightly tilted, like an easel, with a stool before it. A small set of wheeled shelves held a miscellany of painter's supplies: inks, blocks of paper, a cluster of brushes in a jar, and a tray with tubes of water-colors laid neatly in a row.

As I stared at these possessions left so brazenly about, I was enraged. How *dare* anyone move in like this, without so much as a by-your-leave, just march right in and take over the house of a woman too old to defend her own property! The thing to do was to find out who the intruder was; then I'd know whether to say anything to Dixon Mansfield or go directly to the police. I'd have to get in—I couldn't see enough from here—but the window had had a modern turnlatch installed, and it was locked. I peered across at the other windows—yes, they, too, had shiny brass latches, each with the turnkey at right angles to the sash. The Bible door was locked, and bolted, too, probably; it had a solid immobility that argued it was seldom, if ever, opened. How odd that Dixon Mansfield gave me only those two keys . . . How strange that the connecting doors from the main house should also be locked: someone must have a passion for privacy! But perhaps there was a way in on the second floor, and then I could come down through the pantry.

I hurried back to the central hall and up the curving stairway with its diversely spiraled balusters, past the great window of Palladio and on into one of the rooms facing south. It was very like those below. Large and square, it too had a fireplace in the gable wall, but its communicating door was crammed into the outside corner at the foot of a short flight of stairs . . . of course: to allow for the lower ceilings of the older wing. Five steps down and I tried the latch. It opened at a touch, and I stepped into the west wing. Fat lot of good it did me! It was only a bathroom, with another of those toilets with the tank against the ceiling, an enormous footed tub, and a porcelain stove next to the chimney, but no door other than the one by which I had entered.

Beyond the stairwell the central hall was cut off by a corridor running the length of the house and connecting with the wings. A logical means of access, I thought, much better than making a traffic lane of the bedrooms. For some reason (I didn't stop to analyze it) I was uneasy at the idea of empty rooms gaping at my back, so I left the doors closed on the north side of the corridor as I passed and groped my way to the west wing, where there were again five steps down, and a door.

To my surprise, its brass knob turned easily. Now I was indeed in the oldest part of the house, in some sort of small hallway. Judging by the first floor, there ought to have been a lavatory on my right . . . There was. Now I had light enough to see by, and I crossed to the door that must lead to the stairs. I might have known! Locked!

I fairly shook it in my frustration. Then I searched about for the key—perhaps it was hanging in friendly fashion from a handy hook, I thought absurdly—and of course it wasn't. I opened the door to the large room over the kitchen (naturally *that* door wasn't locked!) but even with this additional light I could find nothing. I wished I had learned something useful in college, like how to pick a lock. In films it looks so easy—the hero whips out a piece of plastic and next thing you know he has the door open. Or he slips a piece of paper under the door, pokes the key out, and catches it on the paper (in films it never bounces off). I squinted through the keyhole and was able to make out a patch of dimly lit slanted ceiling. No key.

Oh, well, I could always go back and report to Dixon Mansfield that the west wing appeared to be under siege, and leave it to him to take appropriate steps. Meanwhile, I'd see as much of the house as I could. And so, lured by nothing stronger than my own curiosity (or so I thought), I moved on into the room above the kitchen.

In size the same, with windows on three sides and the inevitable fireplace centered on the long outside wall, this room was otherwise as unlike the kitchen as one could imagine. Despite the audacious grapevine across the south windows, the room was saturated with a cold, impersonal light as shadowless as a surgery, for nothing obscured the other windows and no trees were near. Walls and woodwork had at one time been painted a pale green, faded now wherever the sun reached to a sickly shade like bleached asparagus. The room had no furniture but did not feel empty, for in the paneling above the chair rail were six large rectangles of wallpaper depicting, I realized with reluctance, the scenes of Hogarth's *The Harlot's Progress*.

The series was, regrettably, most faithfully rendered. There between the south windows was the innocent girl arriving in London and the simpering madame chucking her under the chin, like a greedy woman at a meat counter. Above the fireplace, between the north windows, and on the first panel beyond the door, came the three that might be called 'Steps Descending into Hell'. I paused to stare at that scene where the magistrate, pompous as a donkey, comes strutting in (whether on business or pleasure I have never been sure), and the harlot's face, blowsy, coarse, is disintegrating with drink and (I suppose) self-disgust. And now, further along the inner wall where the light was most clear and pitiless, her death in a garret, horror piled on horror, the death throes almost audible; lastly, the funeral, the human scavengers snapping and snarling over the harlot's scant leavings like hungry dogs on a trash heap.

It was an astounding choice of subject for what must have been intended as decoration. Surely someone peculiarly insensitive had done the selecting. Or ruthless, I thought, and was taken back by the notion. And then I thought: *if there's anything to be heard in this room, I don't want to hear it.* And with that thought I became

aware that I felt crowded, as if the walls were closing in. My throat seemed tight and swollen, and I was having difficulty breathing. But this is nonsense, I thought; I've never had a fit of claustrophobia in my life! The air's stale, that's all—no one for God knows how long has let in a breath of fresh air here!

I tugged open a north window—there were no locks up here so far from the ground—and as I drank in the sweet pellucid air I told myself it was only natural my nerves were on edge, for Gam was dying . . . I was sure Gam was dying. . . .

The roughness of the splintery sill beneath my fingers reassured me, and my dizziness passed. I became aware of the house wall, that thick skin of brick encasing room after empty room (excepting, of course, the room below, so unexpectedly not empty at all). I leaned out to look down. From this angle I could see (or thought I could see, so faint was the impression) the ghost of the carriage drive, just the barest dimpling in the blanket of leaves, more like a crease ironed out . . . but it was there, branching off from the lane by the mound that had concealed the house as I came, and rejoining the lane where it disappeared behind the ancient maples to the east.

I stared at the mound. Odd it should be so smooth; one would have thought it manmade if it weren't for those trees—ash, mostly—growing from its roof. Of course if it had been heaped up years ago, the trees would have had time to seed themselves, and to grow that tall . . .

I moved across to a west window for a better view. From here I could see a narrow slit of darkness behind the dense screen of lilac still in full leaf: the way in, no doubt. Could it be an Indian burial mound? But they weren't likely to have a settlement this far from a river. Well, then, a family mortuary? The Carsons must have had to have some place to put their dead until the ground thawed . . . I could not say why such an idea sprang to my mind, for the mound bore little resemblance to those prim structures by the gate of a village cemetery. I'm getting morbid, I thought. It's this room . . . it's those panels. And I turned to face them down.

It could have been an innocent and lovely room, I thought angrily. Why destroy it with Hogarth at his most

murderous? Well, I didn't have to stay here—I was free to leave, wasn't I?

Had I shut the door as I came in? I couldn't remember. It was shut now. What if it were locked? *What if it were bolted, and I couldn't get it open—I can't get out—*

Of course it wasn't locked. I wrenched the door open and pulled it to behind me, but it wasn't until I was back in the main house, the connecting door securely shut behind me, that my breathing steadied and my racing pulse commenced to slow. *What on earth ailed me?* Did I imagine the house exuded a—a residual of the lives it once had known? What nonsense! I was the victim of my own imagination, that was all. I had taken too much to heart the tale of the mother who had yielded up her child, of Gam banished from the home she loved. The emotions they felt could not have been absorbed by the very walls of the house—the notion was absurd!

Nevertheless, I was relieved to find the corridor door to the east wing locked—and ashamed of my relief. I glanced briefly into the rooms to the north of the corridor, and then into the two large rooms facing south. All were empty in every sense: not so much as a pin had been left behind, and in none did any miasma of ancient grief seep forth to plague my nerves.

Mindful of Gam's request, I stood very still and listened. I could hear nothing, nothing at all. How astonishingly silent is a house that has no oil burner rumbling in the cellar, no pump sending water swishing through pipes, no throbbing refrigerator, no whining vacuum cleaner, no humming air conditioner, no beaters, no blender, no radio, TV, or stereo—just silence, utter and complete! It's bone-deep restful, I thought. How stupid we are, to drown in decibels the peace we so desperately need! Paradise is just beyond our eardrums, and we will not let ourselves hear; we deafen ourselves with the cacophony we call civilization. . . .

I was curled on the seat beneath the great south window, gazing onto the slope below. I wondered idly which plants were intended to be there and which were volunteers—a lovely word, I thought, for those invading hordes of lusty barbarians, the sumac and goldenrod, seedling pine and hardhack that soon would erase for all time (except for the immortal lilacs) every sign that once a

woman—I did not doubt that it *had* been a woman—had planted a garden here, had walked along paths kept clipped, had strolled down to that pond, whose waters glimmered through the tamaracks ringing its shore.

Enchanting trees, tamaracks . . . So shocking to the uninitiated—*what, an evergreen turning color? Whatever next! Lose their needles, I suppose!* And I thought, idly, how subjective is one's sense of pleasure—it depends so much on who, and what, and where. That piercing shade of fresh green known as 'apple', for example: so welcome in spring sunlight out-of-doors, so blatant and cheap indoors on woodwork or furniture. So it is with the soft apricot of the tamarack in autumn: a charming shade when it displays itself on an otherwise bare hillside, but a definite drawback on a human head. In hair like mine, I mean. "A watered-down, dirty russet, faded, like dead leaves," Bard had complained, adding accusingly, "Impossible to get it right!" As if it were my fault. Perhaps to punish me, he had given that portrait apple-green hair.

Had Tamarack itself once been a garden, before it was invaded by weeds of envy, greed, and hate? Had there been a time when the house bloomed with life, when a child sitting where I now sat would hear laughter in a distant room . . . the clatter of a meal being prepared and someone singing at the task . . . a time when the scent of lilacs drifted through the open door, or in the cool of an evening, firelight danced on the walls . . . and here in this hallway, linking the rooms where the weary slept, where lovers entwined and children were born and the aged died, here had a child leaned over the stairwell, and eagerly called, joyously called, "*Wait! Wait for me—*"

I put my hand on the rail, and it was like a caress; I intended it so. A house ought not to die of lack of love, I thought; emptiness is no fit way for a house to die. Flood, or fire: death at sword's point, honorable and terrible and swift. But not this . . . not desertion.

My fingertips lightly grazing the rail, my head high, I began the descent. Ruffles of white cambric swirled about my ankles . . . Perhaps I wore a train, perhaps I carried a fan . . . Lost in a daydream, for those few moments I *was* Gam, a young and radiant Miss Martha, the years ahead warm with promise, Martha Stark Carson born in Tamarack in the Year of Our Lord eighteen hundred and

eighty-one, descending these stairs on a scented evening in early summer—

I froze.

Sunlight spilled along the hall from the open garden door, and down its center, aslant the floor and angled up the wall, stretched the shadow of a man.

Chapter Six



I could not see him from where I stood stock-still with fright. If I don't breathe perhaps he won't see me, I thought with wild illogic. No use to scream: who would hear? If I made a dash for the door, would I reach it before he . . . But if I ran back up (like a child in a burning house) I'd be trapped in that nightmare of dead-end corridors and locked doors.

He was moving along the hall unhurriedly, his step deliberate, a countryman's step, I thought as he passed beneath where I stood, a hunter's way of walking, yet not quiet, for his boots came down on the parquet flooring carelessly, as if it were his floor and he could mar it if he so chose. He walked as if he were master here, glancing about idly curious, as one returning from a journey looks to see what has changed in his absence; and as he put his hand on the newel post and stared up at me he had an air of possession, as if this were his house, not Gam's, and I the intruder, not he.

Suddenly he smiled. "You can come down," he said. "I'll not eat you."

I did not move. I was gazing at him as if I were memorizing every detail of his appearance, should I have to identify him. This was a mistake—sometimes they kill you if they think you'll know them again—but I could not take my eyes off his face.

"Who are you? What are you doing here?" I said huskily.

"I was about to ask you the same thing."

He had a canvas sack slung across his back, and he wore some kind of old felt hat. Out of courtesy, a man removes his hat on entering another man's house; in his own, depending upon his habit and his breeding, he may may not be so punctilious.

"I have a right to be here," I said.

"So have I," he answered me. "I live here."

"Don't be silly, no one lives here!" Which was absurd, in view of what I had seen through the windows of the west wing. "Gam—I mean Miss Carson—this is her house—she would have told me!" His eyes were black under heavy brows, and there were hollows beneath his cheekbones. I took what reassurance I could from the fact there was no shadow of beard on his jaw; villains, I told myself—tramp-villains, anyway—traditionally have at least a week's beard. Nevertheless I added cannily, "Miss Carson *knows* I'm here. She sent me."

He was no longer smiling. "You must be Mrs. Milne." He let his pack slide to the floor, giving the gesture a taint of familiarity, like a man loosening his tie. "The heir, come to inspect. My name is St. John. I take it you got my letter."

I said sharply, "I am *not* 'the' heir!"

"One of them, then." He thrust his hat carelessly beneath the strap of his pack. "They must be gathering like vultures flapping into the trees, and there they'll hunch until it's time to swoop down and squabble over the spoils."

"What a—a poisonous thing to say!"

He shrugged. "Odd, now that the end is near, how everyone can manage to get here. She's been asking for you for weeks. 'Where's Emelie?' every time I call on her."

"No one told me," I said. "No one sent word." My voice shook. Gam asking for me and I not knowing—I could not bear to think of it. "They're supposed to let me know! The matron—Mrs. What's-her-name—" I couldn't think of the woman's name; my mind is a sieve when I'm scared.

He was regarding me with a faint smile, as if he took my lapse of memory as proof that for months at a time I never gave a thought to anybody at Années d'Or—what

a *hellish* name! The Golden Years! As if Gam were now in her glory!

I said angrily, "Very kind of you, no doubt, to bother to write me, since Mrs. What's-her-name couldn't take the trouble—Mrs. Splinter—no, that's not right—"

"Sphincter."

"Spindler," I said coldly. He needn't ridicule me just because he'd seen I was afraid. And he *had* seen, as he now made clear.

"Why don't you yield your defensive position and come along for some coffee?" He stepped to the front door and swung it shut. "Lock that, will you? I assume you have the key." Catching up his pack, he strode off down the hall as if he couldn't care less whether or not I followed.

The lock was a modern one mortised into the stile. I fished out the key Dixon Mansfield had given me and turned the dead bolt, and then, perhaps to reassert my own volition of action (for I had resented the way he spoke, as if it were natural he should order me about), I slid shut the heavy brass bolts mounted across the top and bottom of the door. Strangely enough, the gesture was reassuring; I felt like a householder making everything snug for the night.

I saw he was watching me from the other doorway. "You'll have to come this way," he said. "You can't get through from the west rooms, they're locked."

"I know, I tried them—"

But he had already stepped out without waiting for my reply.

This man was so offensive in manner and speech I could not believe Gam would confide in him. She couldn't know he was here—she would have told me. But then there was that letter—if he were up to no good, why did he write me? Catching up with him by the door to the west wing, I said the first thing that came into my head: "Why didn't my grandaunt have Mrs. Spindler write me? Why did she ask you?"

He was coolly helping himself to Gam's grapes. "Why not? I was there." He broke off another cluster; they looked no bigger than marbles. "You don't mind if I make free with these, do you? I assumed they came with my rent. Here, try some yourself—they're ripe enough,

but they'd do better if you have that vine pruned back sometime."

Shocked, I stared at the fruit as if I didn't know what it was. "*The heir, come to inspect . . .*" I was afraid to follow where these words led. Tamarack mine? No—no, it was impossible. That is, it was highly unlikely . . . *Dear God! Birds of carrion . . .*

The grapes were almost as warm as my hand; beneath their bloom they were navy blue. "Eat them," I heard him say. "They won't poison you."

I looked up angrily. "Why do you keep saying things like that? You 'won't eat' me—'they won't poison' me—"

"I'm trying to be reassuring, in my clumsy way," he said, and I could not tell if he were laughing at me. He inserted a key in the door and opened it. "Let me have that other key—my landlord didn't see fit to trust me with any but just the one." He strolled back to the main house, pulled shut the heavy door, and locked it. Returning, "You stood there on the stairs like a child defending a snow fort, but unfortunately all her ammunition has melted," he said, and he had the effrontery to grin. "What did you think I was going to do—rob you, rape you, or murder you?"

I pocketed the key. "You overestimate yourself," I said with dignity. "I was not in the least afraid of you!"

"Were you not? In that case, I must say you don't show very good sense."

I could feel my face burning, but whether with embarrassment at my transparent lie or anger at his amusement, I didn't know. I said coldly, "And who is your landlord?"

"Why, your cousin Fenwick."

"Oh, yes," I said stiffly. "Gordon Fenwick. But how can he—I mean, Tamarack isn't his—"

"God forbid," he said, and I flushed again; he has eyes like a hawk, I thought uneasily. "I prefer to think of Fenwick as my landlord rather than Miss Carson as my landlady—that word has a disagreeable ring for me. Go on in, why don't you?"

Taking this for as cordial an invitation as I was likely to get, I preceded him into the hallway and into the room beyond. As I stepped onto its stone floor, once again I was aware—no, it was more as if a ghost of a notion brushed past me, as lightly as cobweb on my sleeve—I

sensed that I was expected, it was a homecoming, but what kind I could not tell . . . I looked about me, and I could see no reason for this extraordinary sensitivity of my nerves, of antennae out, signals sought and received; if they brought a message, it was one I could not read.

He had opened a window to the south and one to the west, and a fresh breeze fluttered the pages of a newspaper lying on the table: *The Welkin Horizon*—poetic, but not a name I'd ever heard before. The flat smell of dead ashes began to drift from the room, and I fancied I caught the scent of ripened grapes.

He must have left the stove with kindling ready, for the crackle of flames was loud in the room. He carried the blue enamel coffeepot from the stove to the sink, and its bottom grated on the soapstone; water from the single faucet splashed noisily. One would walk miles getting a meal in this enormous kitchen, I thought as I watched him return to the stove. Using a kind of spare handle, he removed one circle from the flat surface so the pot was directly over the flames; the heavy iron clanged as he set the ring aside. Now he crossed to a vast cupboard reaching almost to the ceiling against the inner wall of the room; now he was back at the table with a can of coffee. In spite of his boots he moved with easy grace. His hair, which was thick and rather long, was so black it seemed navy-blue (like the grapes, I thought) when he passed through a shaft of sunlight. As he stood there spooning coffee into the percolator, he must have felt my eyes upon him, for he glanced up, and at once I looked away . . . looked around the room at the stone floor swept clean, looked at the narrow day bed neatly made up, at the oil lamp on its bracket, at the easel table against the north window. Through every window the light poured in: in thin brilliant streaks threading through the vines on the south, in a flood of translucent green from the west, in a torrent of clear, unclouded purity from the north. I couldn't have been here before—even if I'd been no more than five years old, I wouldn't have forgotten it. And yet . . . and yet . . .

"Wait—wait for me—"

I shivered.

He said abruptly, "Now what's the matter? You look as if you heard a ghost."

"You don't *hear* ghosts, you see them!" Which was absurd—surely if one can do either, one can do both.

"And did you?" He stood without moving, watching me as a hunter might. As if he were waiting for me to move into range.

"I never do in the daytime," I said lightly, and because I found his gaze disquieting, I strolled to the window that was open toward the west. Gazing out in that direction I could keep my back toward him, I wouldn't have to face that steady stare, faintly derisive, touched with disdain. "Come back and tell me what you hear," Gam had said. How *dare* he presume to criticize how often I visited her? What did he know of why I came, or why I didn't? Nothing . . . I could hear the coffee begin to bubble in the pot; the homely domestic sound should have been comforting. I found myself staring at that strange hump of earth by the edge of the woods. From this angle all I could see was the top of the mound, like a huge loaf of bread with a crust of fallen leaves.

I said casually, "What on earth is that? It can't be a natural cave."

He came up behind me to look over my shoulder. "You must be a real flatlander if you don't recognize a root cellar. That's where your ancestors stored their treasure over the winter. I mean their real wealth—potatoes and squash, onions and turnips and apples—whatever would keep in the cold."

Like a body awaiting burial. . . . I stood there, truly stunned by my mind's irresponsibility. It doesn't seem to care *what* it thinks, I thought in panic.

"I don't see how they kept things from freezing," I said hurriedly, "not even if they put a good stout door across."

"There's at least four feet of soil on top, and in bitter weather they could bank the door with hay. We had one, one winter when I was a child. Things kept very well."

Acutely aware of him there behind me, I moved away. "This kitchen must have been very awkward to cook in," I said. "Imagine having to shovel your way into the larder for an onion!"

He said dryly, "I should hope they'd have enough wit to take out a few days' supply at a time." He was watch-

ing me move restlessly about the room. Then: "What are you running from?"

"Nothing." I trailed my finger along the smooth worn edge of the table—how many times had a woman washed it clean, and put the soup plates around, and called the children to supper? "It's just that I feel so strange—as if I'd been here before, yet I know I haven't. Have you ever felt like that?"

"No, but then I don't believe in ghosts, either," he said with a faint smile. "Not even at night."

"That's because no one haunts you," I said, and to my horror I felt my eyes fill with tears. I turned away. Dear God! What was it about this room, what was it about this man that made me feel so wide open, so vulnerable, so like a . . . a target?

"Have some coffee." He filled two ironstone cups and offered me one. "Sit over here near the stove. This room gets clammy when it's shut up any time at all."

I sat at the table on one of the thumb-back chairs and he took the other, across from me. He had put out a can of milk and a bowl of sugar but I refused both. I watched him spoon sugar into his cup—if I looked at his hands I didn't have to look at his face, one is so exposed when one looks at a face—and I thought, there's something strange about his hands, something that doesn't go with the rest of him; and I went on looking, at his long, strong fingers grasping the spoon, the skin across his knuckles as tanned as his face, the nails clean and well shaped. As if he had had them manicured, I thought incredulously. It was a beautiful hand; it could be resting on the hilt of a sword in a painting by Clouet, or fingering the crimson folds of a cardinal's robe. No, it doesn't go with the rest of him, I thought, with his shoulders sloping like a boxer's, with his strange, feral walk. I looked up into his face, then, and I thought, yes it does . . .

"I couldn't write sooner," he said, watching me in that oddly impersonal way he had. "I felt that to suggest it would be like urging her to send for the priest, for last rites. She kept saying she would soon be well, and I went along with it—why not? I think, too, she was hoping you would come without being sent for—one always treasures love offered freely above that for which one must beg." He waited a moment; then, when I made no response:

"What are you going to do with this house, turn it into a school?"

I lifted my cup with shaking fingers. "I wish you would stop saying things like that. My grandaunt is very unlikely to leave Tamarack to me, but if she did, I certainly wouldn't fill it with other people's children!"

"With your own, then?" he said with one of his rare smiles. "How many do you have?"

I could feel the blood drain from my face, and then come back in a painful tide. "None," I said, scarcely above a whisper. I began to stir my coffee, although it needed no stirring. I watched the dark liquid swirl and swirl.

The silence stretched until I thought there would be no way to break it, ever. We would go on and on sitting there, two people frozen in Time. Then I heard it—I heard *something*—in the room overhead: a thudding, a muted crashing, as if a creature in a cage were flinging itself against the bars. So thick and solid were the intervening floorboards, it was barely audible, yet I could hear panic in the sound, in the uneven, frantic beating.

"*What's that?*" Plainly terrified, I leapt to my feet and stared at the ceiling as if I hoped to find the answer writ there on the beams. "But that room is empty! I was just up there—it was completely empty! Dear God, what *can* it be?"

"I have no idea," he said quietly, "but I propose to find out. Wait here if you like."

"No, I—I'll come with you."

We went along the terrace to the garden door, where I numbly handed him the key, too ashamed of my moment of fright to meet his eyes; and I followed him in and up the stairs like a meek, subservient shadow. The doors to the north rooms were open, as I had left them, and there was enough light for us to make our way swiftly along the corridor and down the steps into the little hallway. He paused for a moment by the Hogarth room and listened. Then he opened the door and stepped in. I heard him laugh softly.

"No ghost this time," he said. "Only a bird—a hermit thrush, I think. Let's hope she doesn't die of fright."

Against the blinding light of the west windows there hovered a reddish-brown blur that dashed against the

panes again and again, as mindless in its self-destruction as a moth against a lamp.

I said, "I—I left a window open."

He approached the bird, it seemed to me, soundlessly, yet it plunged across the room in panic, to strike a south window with such force I thought it must shatter the glass. There it beat futilely against the barrier it could not see. It will kill itself, I thought helplessly. And it's my fault—it's always my fault!

I said, "What if we opened the window? Or—or all of them?"

"And hope she heads right? Likely she'll break her fool neck first." Indeed, it did seem likely, for the bird now hurled itself against the inner wall, where, blind with terror, it scrabbled for a perch on the deathbed panel. "Shut the door or we'll have the whole house to hunt her in," he ordered me. Then, not taking his eyes from the bird: "And give me your scarf."

I untied the silk at my throat. Holding my scarf with his two hands as if it were a net, again he stalked the bird. When I saw he intended to pinion it in the folds of cloth, I cried out impulsively, "Oh, don't hurt it!" And the bird fled back against the south window.

"Would you oblige me by being quiet?" he said through his teeth.

Once again he stalked the thrush. Dropping the silk over the struggling bird, he gathered the ends together and carried the fluttering sack to the open window, where he shook his captive free. I was as relieved to see it swoop away as if it had been myself entangled there.

He shut the window and turned to favor me with a cool stare. "Sometimes you have to risk hurting something," he said evenly, "especially when you're trying to free it from its own fears."

Flushed and sullen, I took the silk and knotted it once again about my throat. I was ashamed at my moment of hysteria, and could think of nothing to say to excuse it. His attention had been caught by the panels; he was proceeding slowly about the room, with his accustomed step, now, with his graceful, careless walk. He began to whistle softly, some frivolous tune that I did not recognize.

"Good God," he said at last, "whoever did this must have hated women."

"You mean Hogarth?" And knew as I said it that of course that was not what he meant.

"Clearly I do not mean the artist," he said. "That's hardly their usual trouble, is it? Dislike of women? Quite the opposite." And he laughed.

For a moment I was sick with apprehension. Then reason reasserted itself. *Stop it, you fool. No one knows anything whatsoever about it . . . no one living, that is.*

If he had noticed my discomfiture he gave no sign. "No," he was saying, "I meant whichever of your ancestors indulged his taste for the unorthodox by selecting Master William's satire. Have you any idea what this room was used for? It strikes me as somewhat large for a bedchamber, and, in any case, the paintings are hardly the choice of a loving husband." He frowned at the death-bed panel. "In my opinion they wouldn't even be suitable for a bawdy house."

"I have to go," I said coldly. "My cab will be waiting."

He followed me along the dim corridor and into the sunlit hall. "Why do you pretend to be offended, Mrs. Milne?"

"I'm not pretending!"

"So you *are* offended. Was that what your ancestor was up to?"

"Of course not!" I started down the stairs.

He remarked blandly, "I thought perhaps you might know if a certain mercenary streak ran in the family."

He was baiting me, I realized, and I couldn't imagine why. Or were we back to an oblique discussion of vultures?

"I really don't know anything about my how-many-times-great-grandfather except that he built this house and his name was Israel Carson. Is that so unusual? I mean, what do you know about *your* great-grandfather?"

"Nothing at all," he said, "not even his name." He laughed. "I can't think of anything that matters less. Once we're dead, Mrs. Milne, we are all equal in our unimportance—we are nameless and faceless and forgotten."

"But that's not true!" I cried. "We live in the memories of those who are still living—who—who loved us, or hated us—we matter to them—we matter terribly—and what we did to them lives on—or they did to us—"

He was holding open the garden door, plainly waiting for me to pass through so he could lock it again.

"I can see Tamarack will suit you very well," he said. "It would have been wasted on someone like me."

Chapter Seven



*the 4th of September
in the Year of Our Lord
Eighteen Hundred and Twenty*

That sounds so impressive, writ that way, but it means no more than that the earth has spun precisely once around the sun since Mr. Carson first came into my life. A year ago this morning when I awoke, I was still myself. I was Emelie Stark. Daughter, niece, maiden, unmarried spinster: safe, safe under my father's roof. By nightfall I had made the acquaintance of Mr. Israel Carson of Welkin, Vermont. He offered for me, and I, ignorant fool that I was, was flattered, and in two days' time had accepted. In two days' time I contracted to throw away my freedom, bring my girlhood to an end, and commence—what? My penance.

Ignorance of consequences, I shall tell Constance, is a sin that seldom goes unpunished.

Poor Journal, you have been most sadly neglected! But I could not help it. No sooner had I discovered the loose floorboard, and contrived to hide my Journal there for safety, than Mr. Carson, stalking about my sitting room while he declaimed against my 'frivolity'—I had been singing to Constance by way of teaching her geography ("Montpelier thus we see, on the Onion rolling free"), and Constance in high spirits had found the name *Onion* hilarious beyond endurance, and had doubled up with laughter—Mr. Carson in his passion against this sin of self-indulgence during what should be the *solemnity* of instruction, caught his heel on the Turkey carpet; and declaring his alarm that I might trip and have a disastrous

fall in my possibly delicate condition, had it tacked securely all around.

So when he was gone to Troy, in January, and to Hartford in March, accompanying a waggon train of salts, whisky and pork to market and was gone each time a fortnight, even then I did not dare try to get at my Journal, having no tool with which to pry up the nails, and no excuse that would pass muster with Mrs. R. But in the Spring I suggested to Mrs. Ransom that the carpet needed beating, and she had her husband pry up the tacks and carry it outside, where she gave it a lusty thrashing. Meanwhile I made haste to retrieve my Journal, and rushed to conceal it in a new hiding place I had contrived. There is a long cupboard that runs behind my sitting room that is used for stores that need to be kept dry—baskets of nuts, nettings of onions, and the like—and in the very back, stacked in the section that juts out over the pantry stairs, there is a great pile of linen sheeting. I did not think my husband likely to dig about in the vastness of this cupboard, and I told Mrs. Ransom loftily that I considered it my province, as the kitchen was hers; and so I hastened to slip the volume under the stack of sheeting, resolving to achieve access to it at faithful intervals.

This did not prove possible, for with the coming of mild weather I no longer had any hours of leisure that were also private. To my relief, I was assigned charge of the sallet garden (I had feared I would be condemned to the role of Useless Parlour Ornament year-round) and there Constance and I toiled happily during clement weather, and when the rain drove us indoors, so did it Mr. Carson, who stretched himself out with pipe and tankard in that room he uses as office; there he expects me to sit, ledger at hand, ink and pen at the ready, to keep the farm accounts, daily record of the weather, work initiated or accomplished, and the like. These accounts are always started for the year on the 25th of March, Mr. Carson tells me, this being the first day of Spring. (My father said otherwise, but I have learned never to correct Mr. Carson on anything; in any case, the date is near enough.) Of course, on occasion I was permitted to retreat to my sitting room, but I never know when he will join me.

Therefore, dear Journal, today is *truly* my first chance

to reacquaint myself with you! For Mr. Carson has rid off to Montpelier, to speak to the editor of the newly published *Argus* about some editorial or other that irritated him mightily, and he will be gone until day after tomorrow! I could sing, I could dance, I could run and run and run and *run*, like a colt let out to pasture! Oh, *freedom*! Today and tomorrow I am *me*—I am *Emelie*! Just that, nothing more—not Emelie Stark, for I myself deprived me of the right to my father's name; and not, today, not tomorrow, *Emelie Carson*, for he is not here!

So—to go back to where perforce I left off, last Fall.

That very first Sunday after my arrival in Tamarack, Mr. Carson had the horses hitched up, and off we drove to Welkin—he, Constance, and I—to attend Divine Service. It took us over an hour to reach the village, and by the time we were at last clattering down the dusty street towards the meeting house, I was consumed with curiosity to see this *metropolis* about which Mr. Carson had spoken so proudly. "We have our own printing press," my husband informed me. "Also we have a weekly newspaper—*The Horizon*, a *responsible* paper, not like that rag in Montpelier. We have three churches, a gaol, and a court house. We have a tinsmith, a wheelwright, two coopers, a bootmaker, two cabinetmakers, and three masons; besides my grist mill, there's the usual sawmill and woolen manufactory. Then there are the tailors, dressmakers, milliners—indeed, Emelie, whatever you can conceive of to long for can be made right here, and as *well* made as in Boston . . ." I looked about me. BENJ. KENDALL AND SONS, YARD GOODS read a sign over a narrow shop door. SILAS MANSFIELD, HARNESSMAKER, read another. There may have been fully a score of shops before the road divided, to surround a Green, in the center of which a bandstand under construction was about half finished. None of the roads was cobblestoned, and the dust was prodigious.

Boston it was not. But I enjoyed myself, because there were people, people everywhere! Ladies in carriages, gentlemen on horseback, children frolicking on the Green (this last brought a frown to my husband's brow: *enjoying* themselves, and on the Sabbath!) The service seemed to me overlong, perhaps because I worried about Constance, who, sitting so still for such an extended time, seemed to grow paler—or to fade—before my very eyes. However,

her cheeks were restored to colour when at last we emerged into the watery sunshine.

Mr. Carson presented me to a number of bosomy ladies in magnificent bonnets, and then we set out for home. If I do not eat soon, I thought, I shall swoon from hunger! Saturday's supper had been served cold (my husband permits no one of his household to do any work from sundown on Saturday to sundown on the Sabbath, except for the boiling of water for tea) and I had found the victuals singularly unappetizing: roasted potatoes, dried corn soaked and boiled, bean porridge, and hasty pudding—a meal to chastise the soul, once the heat has fled the food. Now I wished I had before me what I had toyed with the night before!

Hunger must have sharpened my wits, because on our return drive I really *saw* what I had scarcely noticed going: the truly wretched hovels in which Mr. Carson's labourers dwell. We would come upon a small clearing surrounded by slash fence, within which would be a log hut with a roof made of strips of bark. When I commented on this (to me) exotic building material, Mr. Carson coolly observed, "Hemlock bark makes a most serviceable roof. It has the virtue of being both cheap and plentiful. I used it to cover the walls as well as the roof of my first shelter—it stood where the smoke house is now. For bedding I had a tick filled with straw, and for cover, my first bearskin. Do not pity the dwellers in these modest domiciles, Emelie—if they are not afraid to work, and work hard, they too can prosper."

Perhaps, I thought. But it must be hard to grow rich when one receives a single shilling for a week's work.

Lunch was waiting, and most welcome. I know what it was, even now, a year later, because it was—is—what we always have for the noonday meal on the Sabbath: hard-boiled eggs, bread and butter, cookies, cheese, crackers, doughnuts, gingerbread, and loaf cake. By special dispensation from Heaven, I make the tea. As we eat, I reflect how fortunate it is that chewing and swallowing are not viewed by our Heavenly Father as *work* . . . and then I thank God for His mercy that I have not expressed this thought aloud!

At first, seeing how strictly my husband observed the Lord's Day, I had thought we would be attending Divine

Services regularly. However, our attendance fell off abruptly with the first snow, Mr. Carson announcing that Almighty God did not intend to freeze His creatures to death in order to spare their souls Hell-fire (I am quoting him exactly); we would avoid the sin of suicide and stay by our own fireside, where we could do our duty as Christians by reading aloud from the Bible and by composing (and reciting) our prayers, which being based on our intimate knowledge of our own failures and weaknesses, ought to be all the more effective in *grubbing* out our sins and planting virtue in the fallow ground so exposed. . . .

It was a good description, I thought, of his farming methods, which though crude seem effective. Where the trees are felled the stumps still stand, and the task of hauling them out is Herculean and may take another ten years; according to his farm accounts (which I have read, for lack of other matter) he has cut over nearly three hundred acres of forest. From these he made over ninety tons of crude pearlash. What crops he now has—flax and wheat, rye and Indian corn—he has his labourers plant in irregular patches amongst the great stumps. The soil seems to be most fertile, and the seed leaps from the ground—he has harvested some crops, he tells me, two months after planting!

Alas, that no similar speedy transformation of my lamentably weak character has thus far occurred! But he does not despair, and continues to strive for my acquisition of the virtues of *seemly* behavior, a *sober* cast of countenance, *low* and *gentle* voice, modest and ladylike *gliding* walk—"Emelie! You *ran* down the stair! Is the house afire?"

We went into Welkin on every Sabbath only that first month of October and half of November, and sat for three hours in the unheated church, and I longed for a hot soapstone at my feet like the one which gave me comfort every night, tucked down at the foot of the bed. So vividly did I imagine its presence, that final Sunday, that I was struck by the notion that perhaps the Devil had been tempting me (and in church!) to carnal thoughts. It must have been true—in any case, I was soon punished: on the following Sabbath I miscarried . . . at least I thought I miscarried. I was most bitterly disappointed, because I had begun to hope I was 'in a fambly way', as Mrs. R.

puts it; as soon as my condition should be established beyond all doubt, I could have my side of the bed to myself, or so I hoped. Or could even have a bed to myself.

Sometimes I dream of my narrow high bed in my father's house. Alone! To sleep alone! "Oh merciful God," I prayed silently at Family Services the following Sunday, "grant that I speedily conceive, and then please God induce my husband to believe I need to be let alone . . . let alone . . ."

Half my prayer was granted by Christmas, the other half denied.

September 5, 1820

There was frost this morning, just a whisper of white, not enough to blight the tangle of pompion vines, more like a finger laid to the lips in warning. But I am loath to think about the winter: I dread the darkness and the cold and the snow and the silence—the sun a prisoner, only now and again creeping out weakly for an hour or two. The prospect grips me with apprehension, because, having endured the winter past, I know what lies in store for the child and myself: we shall be confined to the house for weeks on end, with no chance of escape, seeing no one, no one, *no one*—not even a pedlar! not even a savage! With the coming of snow, even the postman ceases his weekly round.

He had been coming every Tuesday regular as clock-work but silent as a sundial. Once there was a message for me from my father, expressing the hope that I was happy in my new life, and once there was a long, repetitive letter from my aunt Lavinia, the gist of which could be simmered down to a handful of words: my father's suit had been unsuccessful. Aside from what I presumed to be communications of a mercantile nature addressed to my husband, what the postman brought most frequently were additional texts with which I am to instruct and cultivate Constance's intellect. (I append here a sampling of their titles: *A Collection of Merry, Polite, Grave, Moral, Entertaining, and Improving Tales; The Great Chain of Truth, A Work Designed for Their Encouragement in Committing the Scriptures to Memory, By Which Little Children and All Others May Resist, Overpower, and Bind the Devil, In All His Temptations Against Them;*

The English Reader, or, Pieces in Prose and Poetry, Selected from the Best Writers, Designed to Assist Young Persons to Read with Propriety and Effect, to Improve Their Language and Sentiments, and to Inculcate Some of the Most Important Principles of Piety and Virtue—a title which I thought the child would do well to be able to read after two years' tutoring. These were in each case the careful choice of Mr. Carson himself, and were designed, I felt sure, as much to improve the teacher as the taught.) Even the postman had been a welcome sight, though not a diverting one, for he never spoke, and had (I thought) a most sad face, with deep-sunk scars in the cheeks.

"Mr. Teagle is not given to tongue-wagging!" I remarked in what I hoped was a spritely manner, attempting to subdue my dismay at the sight of yet another of these tracts which weigh on Constance and me like rain-rotted hay, an apt simile—killing all growth beneath it and commencing to stink on the surface!

"He cannot speak," said Mr. Carson, his eyes on his newspaper. "I prefer not to talk of it; the recollection is painful."

I said nothing more, but my curiosity was aroused. A day or so later, when Mrs. Ransom's Levi was filling the log cradles in the two parlours, I whispered to Constance to go down and ask him what happened to Mr. Teagle, why he never even says good day. Constance went skipping down the stairs and on in boldly—the man is built like a bear, but the child has no fear of him, strangely enough—and asked him in a singsong, artificial voice (which would have enraged her father had he been in earshot), "Mr. Ransom, Mr. Ransom, why does Mr. Teagle never say hello?"

"Because the cat got his tongue. Stand aside, missy—"

"What cat?" Constance said. "What cat got his tongue?"

"It war'n't one o' them fisher cats that goes cryin' like a babe through the winter woods, I tell you *that*!"

"When?" Constance said. "When did the cat get his tongue?"

"Long afore you were borned."

"How?" said Constance, and I began to pity Mr. Ransom. She followed him out into the hall. "How did the cat—"

I could see through the great window of Palladio the figure of my husband, coming up from the barns. "Constance!" I called. "Come up here at once! I must neaten your hair—"

"It was a Canadian cat," said Mr. Ransom with relish. "Shot 'im through the face—"

"Hold yore tongue!" Mrs. Ransom snarled from the doorway to the dining room. "Here comes the mister—"

Constance was safely upstairs and Levi Ransom out the terrace door by the time Mr. Carson, going directly to his office, shouted to Mrs. Ransom to bring him a mug of hot cider. He did not emerge until suppertime. Meanwhile Constance, hair smoothed and polished, apron immaculate, crept down the stairs and fled into the kitchen for her milk and crackers (she is such a birdlike child I feel she must nibble often). What was said then I did not learn until later, although I suspected there had been something, for Constance was more silent than usual (if that were possible) over supper, and I deeply regretted having sent her on my errand.

When I tucked her into bed, she drew me down to hug me, and whispered in my ear, "It was *not* the cat!"

"Of course it wasn't," I whispered back, stroking her cheek. "That's just a way of—of talking—" I stammered over the word.

"He *really* can't, New-Mother," Constance said. "Poor Mr. Teagle, he really cannot talk—Mrs. Ransom said so. He *did* lose his tongue—it was a bullet that did it. Mr. Teagle and Mr. Ransom and my papa were selling their cows to Canada and some of our soldiers were trying to stop them and some of theirs were trying to shoot our soldiers, and poor Mr. Teagle got in the way!"

Shocked to my very soul—*trading! trading with the enemy!*—I could only pull her coverlet higher and whisper, "Do not speak of this again, Constance, I beg you. Your father says the recollection of it is painful to him . . ." As well I can believe, I thought bitterly, and was thankful my father knew nothing of it.

With the coming of snow, it was January before we saw Mr. Teagle again. The second day of the thaw he brought six copies of *The Welkin Horizon* and two tracts for me (*Dueling Incompatible with True Honor* and *An Essay Concerning The Free Agency Of Man, or The*

Powers And Faculties of The Human Mind, The Decrees of God, Moral Obligation, Natural Law, And Morality) but no word from my father or my aunt. Then there was another long gap until April, when the roads became firm again after the mud. This time Mr. Teagle brought me an envelope bordered in black.

Had it not been addressed to me in my father's hand, I would have swooned. His sister Lavinia, my father wrote, had died 'of a chill' in February . . . news that I thought I took with calmness of spirit and not very deep grief, for although I had been fond of my aunt, and grateful for her care, I had not thought my affection particularly intense; I was all the more astonished, therefore, as well as bitterly dismayed and grieved, when within a day I again miscarried.

The spring proved fickle. It was the second week in May before the final snows vanished, and it was yet another week before, overnight, the flush of green swept up the slope from popple to lilac to birch.

Oh, it was so welcome! Oh lovely lovely colour of life! I wished I could sing—sing and dance—everything all at once was so alive *alive!* But I behaved myself, and trod modestly, and kept my eyes downcast and my voice low, and I waited . . . waited like a bird in a cage for the door to be left open accidentally . . . waited until the weather was clement and Mr. Carson was busy with the lambing and I could steal out and not be missed, steal down the slope to the lake and beyond . . .

As soon as we (I always take the child with me) were safely in our kingdom, our courtiers the great pines standing like stalwart guardsmen about us, Constance and I did dance and we did sing, albeit clumsily, no doubt, and rather shrilly, but *heartfeltedly*, for all our lack of skill! After all, who criticizes a bird? Some are superb and sing like angels, and some must make do with what meagre vocal equipment God saw fit to give them. Constance and I did not think we were as lamentable as the jay or the crow, but we knew we did not sing like the meadow lark! Nevertheless, these moments when we cavorted about over the mossy roots of the great trees, chirping and warbling our joy that the flowers were back and the trees all a-greening—at these moments I felt such a passion of

love for the child I trembled with its intensity—I felt most *fiercely* protective, like a veritable tigress!

So I do not believe, because I do not love my husband, my heart is incapable of this emotion. It is just that I must have an *object* towards which to direct my affections; I must feel some degree of pity or tenderness given as well as received—and no one could *pity* Israel Carson! Certainly no woman could!

Summer began abruptly on the 2nd of June, which here in Vermont is Training Day. This occasion appears to the women—I am quoting Mrs. Ransom—as “a passle of foolishness” and an excuse to get drunk together. It begins before daylight, when the local ranking officer (in Welkin, a Captain Mansfield, a crisped and dried husk of a man who lost an arm at Bennington) is awakened by a salute fired outside his house. The amount of damage caused by this salute is directly related to the degree of drunkenness of those firing the muskets, which are supposed to be loaded harmlessly, but are not always so. No one has ever actually had his head shot off, I understand, but shattered window panes after this raucous ‘revillee’ are lamentably frequent.

Although Mr. Carson had not volunteered his services to the militia during what he calls “the recent squabble with the British”, he seemed to feel it his duty to be present in Welkin to witness the presenting of arms, and the marchings back and forth, and whatever else might go on. According to Mrs. Ransom (who daily grows more loquacious on an ever-widening field of subjects) her Levi would count it a poor Training Day that did not include at least one fisticuffs, which he usually won, she said with satisfaction, though not always without some minor damage to his knuckles or his nose. Whatever my husband’s reason for going (perhaps he merely wanted to be sure to have acquaintance with the *supply officer*, I thought nastily, in case the militia is partial to lamb!) it meant that the child and I could actually bow and smile and even *speak* to females other than Mrs. R., we could stroll about and gaze in the shop windows—there was the most fetching green satin calash in the hat maker’s that I thought would go very nicely with my green dress, had I ever occasion to wear it again; I strolled back and forth several times, observing this charming creation from several an-

gles, but did not venture to ask its price, or indeed mention it to Mr. Carson.

At midday a truly splendid collation was set out on planks under the great elms at the west end of the Green, the ladies of the three churches vying with one another in skill and generosity. During this communal feasting, Constance and I sat off by ourselves on a bench near the watering trough and watched the antics of the children and the equally diverting (and sometimes *submerging*) antics of their elders—I counted four total and two partial immersions. And then Mr. Carson (possibly the only sober man present, although he had drunk deeply of the cider barrels which were Captain Mansfield's contribution to the success of the occasion) gathered us up and off we clattered, Mr. Carson breathing somewhat noisily and appearing a trifle more impatient at each tollgate than was his custom. We arrived back in Tamarack an hour after sunset. I had tended to the child and had her snugly tucked in by the time my husband, who could not trust the sobriety of any of his help, returned from bedding the horses.

"The moon just rises—it is a waning moon, Emelie," said he, "best for planting and harvesting underground crops." And he gave me a lickerish grin, and I realized with sinking heart that Israel Carson, too, is as are other mortal men: the fumes of alcohol do inflame his senses. So I, docile as any sacrificial heifer, allowed myself to be led to bed.

For the first time, I dared to pray I would *not* conceive. I had come to realize there was no respite for me in this direction. I commence to believe that any prayer concerning God's Plan (as Mr. Carson refers to our children) borders on blasphemy; at any rate this prayer, too, like most of my prayers, was denied.

The next day was official Planting Day, of course, and Constance and I tucked up our skirts and planted pease and parsnips, turnips and cabbage, potatoes and carrots and pompions and Indian corn, and they all thrived. The sun shone and the rains swept down, and before I could spin about three times (it seemed to me) it was already August, and Harvest Home, and the haying was done and the wheat harvested, and the lambs were separated from the ewes, and in the orchard a flock of prudent blackbirds

made noisy assembly. And I, for the third time, miscarried.

It seems to me that if I could only be treated as well as his prize mare, or even a poor milch cow, I could carry my breeding to a successful conclusion. No one leaves the cow with the bull, or the mare with the stallion; once the mating is accomplished the female is turned out to pasture, or sheltered in her stall, there to wait her time in seclusion, in privacy, in peace. *Let alone*, oh God! It seems to me that the curse, in Genesis, which the God of the Hebrews laid on his disobedient creatures was not that Eve should have desire for her husband, but that her husband should desire her, insatiably, without cease.

Now it is September, and the leaves shiver on the trees, and the grass turns brittle on the stem. Wherever the child and I walk, the sheep stand and stare with astonished faces, as if they cannot quite believe this cold country, where the winters are so long and the summers so short, and never a hot, hot sun, and never a blazing blue sky! I am sorry for them, exiled as they are. At least I had a chance to choose . . . or I thought I did. Though if I had a *real* choice, and could be anything I wished, I'd be one of those birds clustering in the elms, and take wing every fall and fly off to warmth and sunlight and crowded gardens and trees heavy with leaves, to warm rains and scented winds and birdsong drowning the dawn . . . Oh, the dark comes so soon to this north country! And the cold comes early, and stays and stays! I would fly off and leave it all behind me, a bad dream.

But I would take the child with me.

the 7th of September

Mr. Carson returned from Montpelier yesterday. He will stand for the General Assembly, it seems. If I pray for his election, will this wish be granted, because it is not for myself . . . or will it be denied, because of course ultimately it *is* for myself: the Assembly meets in October; there are not sufficient accommodations for families to accompany the members, and the business of the State sometimes takes as long as *two weeks!*

the 8th of September

Tamarack is not, after all, at the very ends of the earth: *we have a visitor!* This most singular turn of events came about as follows:

Constance and I thought to walk to her mother's grave today, there to lay asters and goldenrod. The air was soft and beguiling, for we have slipped briefly back into summer. "Colours fit for a queen," I hold her, "which makes you a princess, my darling," said I, and I let my bonnet fall back so the sun could caress my face.

"Is it my mother's birthday?" Constance asked as we filled our arms with golden sprays and shook the butterflies off the asters—the whole slope down to the lake was vibrant with the black and yellow beauties, as if a playful wind was tossing flower petals about.

"Not today," I answered in grave, ladylike tone, which caused her to glance up, and then back towards the house, where she saw (as had I, a moment before) her father standing watching us.

"Emelie," he said curtly, "ye set the lass a poor example. Put on your bonnet."

"We—we do but walk to her mother's grave," I said, angry with myself that my voice should falter and my fingers tremble as I refastened the ribbons; from the corner of my eye I could see Constance clutching the flower stems in fright. God knows what malevolent faerie prompted me to continue, but I heard my voice say (still in that shameful quake), "We do not walk abroad in the town, Mr. Carson, or profane the church bareheaded—surely the *sheep* will not be offended!"

"Ye speak like a hoyden," said Mr. Carson coldly. "I would not have the lass a brown-faced savage, nor my wife, either. I expect you to please me in this, Emelie, as I would you did in all things!"

There was nothing in these words to set such a chill about my heart, but it was with leaden step that I went down the slope, Constance walking before me silently, her eyes downcast. I was convinced (against all reason!) he must blame me for my miscarriages, as if, did I but put my mind to it, I could carry a child to term. Had he been *displeased* with Constance's mother for dying?

We pushed through the tawny branches of the tamarack at the water's edge and startled a doe with two fawns. The sight restored our spirits, and I commenced to explain to Constance about the year having twelve months, and her mother's birthday being in the last, namely December, the snows would be deep by then, and so we

were anticipating it by three months . . . and so on. The child stepping light as a butterfly across the clumps of fern, we circled the shore. Like the meadow, she has blossomed over the summer, I was thinking, when suddenly she bolted like a fawn to run laughing through the stand of beech, and I, picking up my skirts, ran fleet as a deer after her, and so we approached her mother's grave in a most unseemly merry mood.

Constance flung herself down on the mound as if to embrace the mosses. "I *wish* I could give my mother a birthday hug! I remember on my birthday you gave me a hug and four kisses—one for each year, you said—oh, I wish, I *wish* I could—" and the poor child, changeable in mood as a summer day, as quick to go from sunshine to storm, burst into a flood of tears.

I took her in my arms and rocked her. "Hug me," I crooned, "for when you hug me you are hugging your *own* mother too, Constance, poor baby—poor poor baby!"

"*What ails the child?*" . . .

Startled near out of my wits, I looked round.

A stranger, a man in countryman's clothing—homespun breeches, leather jerkin, linsey-woolsey shirt—a young man, I saw, with fiery red hair and very blue eyes—stood at the edge of the clearing. He had an odd-shaped pack over his back, like a pedlar, but what he could be selling I could not see. I did not think he was a pedlar, his expression lacked that *forward* look, impudent, which pedlars have (must have, I suppose, to make a living at their intrusive trade).

"Yes, I am real," he said softly, in a smiling voice. "I see the child's tears were just a passing shower—look, she is sunny again." This was not quite the truth: Constance was staring at him as if bewitched, but her tears *had* ceased to flow. "Now smile," he coaxed gently. "That will be the sun—and when the sun shines after the rain, that's when we see the rainbow. Come, make me a rainbow!"

Constance looked up at him from lowered lashes, and a dimple I never knew she had appeared in her cheek.

"She—she grieves for her dead mother," I said with what dignity I could. I was still so startled I could hardly draw breath.

"I trust her grief will blow off like milkweed silk." He

did not move except to doff his hat, and bow. "My name is Parsloe Rhys," he said. "I am a limner, born in Portsmouth. They tell me there's a great house named Tamarack up this way, whose master has taken him a new wife." He regarded me quietly, his eyes smiling. I could not remember ever seeing a visage with this talent before: to remain sober in every line except for the eyes, which smiled like a pond in sunlight. "I'm hoping he'll ask me to make a likeness of her. What say you—think he might?"

I considered. "I should doubt it," I answered honestly. "My husband has taken an interest in politics, and might wish a portrait of himself—I do not know. There can surely be no harm in asking," I added.

"*Your* husband?" he said, and the colour rose in his face. It must be a curse laid on us who have red hair, I thought, observing this phenomenon with some surprise. "I beg your pardon, Mistress Carson—I took you for the child's nursemaid. You look so very young, I had not thought you a matron. I am sorry." The smile faded from his eyes, and he stared at me. We stared at one another. I could not think what to say, so said nothing. "I do not quite know what I mean—I am not a man of words," he said, and flushed again.

I stood up, and Constance shook out her petticoats. "I think we had best be going," I said in a matronly voice.

He caught up his pack. "Yes, to be sure—allow me, Mistress Carson, to escort you—"

"No," I said quickly, "but I do thank you. I—I think it would—I think you should follow me . . ."

He said nothing, staring first at me, then at the child. I could feel my own face colouring.

"I think it would be much the best," I said in a low voice, "if you waited perhaps half an hour and then came, as if by chance." Shame at I knew not what—no, that is an untruth: I knew very *well* what—made my face hot. I could feel his gaze following me as I took Constance by the hand and we walked quickly away.

He did come, and presented himself to Mr. Carson, and explained the nature of his calling, and exhibited one or two sketches he had done which showed considerable skill, I thought, though of course I had no way of telling if the likeness was any good. When he proposed that Mr.

Carson consider having the likenesses of his family done, my husband frowned over the sketches, and then he took the young man into his office to talk terms. They have been in there now for nearly two hours. It is so strange to hear, even muted by walls and closed doors, *voices* in this house!

It is getting on for supper time, and I am thinking perhaps they are reaching an agreement, and the young man will be staying.

I should very much like to have a likeness of Constance, she is like a white violet in a cup of thinnest porcelain.

They are coming out. I hear the door open, and my husband speak—his tone is pleasant, even cordial—and then I hear the young man laugh.

In the year I have dwelt in this house, this is the first time I have heard anyone laugh within the walls of Tamarack.

Chapter Eight



It was a relief to find Ken Kendall waiting, friendly grin flashing; it was a relief not to have to fence with him, not to have to keep on the alert for sudden thrusts that would draw blood if I failed to parry them properly. It was a relief to sink, anonymous, onto a bench in the little café (today I was ahead of the crowds) and not feel analytical eyes boring through me. It was even (in a way) a relief to walk into *Années d'Or* and be greeted effusively by the matron, as if my mere presence were a great favor for which I could not be thanked enough.

"Oh, Mrs. Milne!" she twittered as she escorted me to the hospital wing, "how *very kind* of you to come! You're a *teeny* bit early—the doctor is still making his rounds, and then Mr. Fenwick wants to pop in for a moment, I hope you don't mind?"

I waited in the small parlor across from Gam's room.

I stared at the fake arum lilies on the plexiglass table. There wasn't a magazine in sight or a newspaper. Like being in limbo, I thought, and wondered what Gordon Fenwick wanted to see Gam about.

A door opened and I heard Gam say, "I doubt I'll see you on Monday, doctor. I doubt I'll be here."

"Now, Miss Martha, you'll make a hundred yet, mark my words."

"Not if I have anything to say about it," Gam said flatly. "Me puffing away at a cake with enough candles to burn the place down, and some young whippersnapper taking my picture to put in the papers along with my age bold as brass for everybody to read! No, thank *you*, Doctor!"

Women! I thought helplessly, and stared out the window. The doctor's brisk step faded and another, more deliberate, approached, the blithe click-click of the matron in obbligate. "Just as soon as ever you're through, you'll let Mrs. Milne know, won't you? She's right across the hall." But I wasn't quick enough to catch more than a glimpse of a thick neck and a broad tweed jacket.

"Gordon! I have nothing more to say to you! If it weren't for Nora—"

The door closed. Five minutes passed . . . ten minutes . . . were they going to permit this fellow Fenwick to wear Gam out? Where *was* the nurse? I went into the hall.

I could hear Gam quite plainly: "That's enough! Now go away—I'm tired—" When the rumble started again, I rapped on the door, opened it, and said brightly, "Gam, did you call?"

"Oh, *Emelie!* Tell Gordon to go—he's being tiresome—"

Gordon Fenwick was perched on the front edge of his chair, his jacket unbuttoned over his ample belly. "So you're Cousin Emelie! *Well*, well—" His eyes slid from my faded tangerine hair to my scuffed shoes and back again. "Martha is cross because I've been keeping her from you." He patted Gam with his bear's paw of a hand, and I saw her flinch. "Have a nice visit, girls!" As he stuffed a paper into his pocket, he slid his eyes over me again; then, he made his exit.

"What on earth did he want, Gam?" I said, and kissed her.

"Never mind Gordon," she said fretfully. "It's all too tedious. Tell me, what did you think of Tamarack?" And she gazed at me eagerly, her heart in her eyes.

I picked up her hand and held it in both of mine. I felt as if I were bringing bad news about someone very close to her—a lover perhaps—and I had to choose my words with care.

"Tamarack is beautiful, Gam," I said. "It's much larger and more grand and dignified than I ever expected. A bit run-down, of course. But still very beautiful. And lonely—"

"Lonely?" said Gam sharply.

"Yes, because it's so empty." I was about to add that the house seemed betrayed, but I caught myself in time. "But of course it isn't really empty, is it? I mean, with Mr. St. John living there—"

"Who?" Gam said. "Who's living there?"

"Why, J-Justin St. John," I stammered, taken aback.

"Oh, *Justin!*" Gam said. "I couldn't think for a moment—yes, of course! He comes to see me, you know. I declare he's the most outrageous flirt! Did he show you any of his paintings?"

I stared at her. For the first time I consciously connected the easel by the north window with Mr. St. John. But he couldn't be an artist! Artists were like . . . like Bard.

Gam was smiling. "He kisses my fingers when he comes and he kisses my cheek when he goes and he pays me the most outrageous compliments, and I declare I eat it up!" Her eyes were soft, her cheeks flushed. "I am so glad Gordon had the good sense to urge him to stay at Tamarack—it's the one smart thing Gordon Fenwick has done in months. So why you say the house is lonely I can't imagine—how could Tamarack be lonely with a man like Justin walking through the rooms?"

I couldn't tell her he was using only the one room and had made quite a point of referring to Gordon Fenwick not as his host but as his landlord. I suspected Gam was confusing St. John with someone she had known long ago; it would be no kindness to suggest her memory was playing tricks. But I certainly would let Gordon Fenwick know I was onto him! A *fine* thing, renting the house and pretending to Gam he'd lent it to some impecunious artist!

What was he doing, pocketing the money? Or *had* he lent it? Was St. John attempting to conceal a situation that embarrassed him when he referred in that offhand manner to the rent he paid? Kissing Gam's fingers . . . kissing her cheek . . . What sort of a man would try to charm an old, old woman who lay dying? "*Tamarack would have been wasted on someone like me . . .*" Had he hoped . . . ?

"So you thought Tamarack beautiful, did you?" Gam was saying. "Even though Henry neglected it disgracefully?"

"Very strangely beautiful," I said awkwardly, ashamed of what I'd been thinking. I rhapsodized at some length on the house and its setting, and Gam drank in my words eagerly.

"The view of the lake is best from the lilacs room, don't you think?" she said. "You can see past the trees to the farther shore. And all those stencils—Henry didn't paint over them, did he? I was afraid he might."

"The lilacs room?" I said. "Is that in the east wing? I didn't get in there; it was locked."

She stared at me in amazement. "But the east wing hasn't been locked since Elizabeth Stearns died! She made my father keep it locked—she never was right in the head since Gettysburg, he said. Her sons were all killed then, you know—all five. She hated my father after that—she hated him because he didn't go to the war and he wasn't killed, but her sons were. Hate," Gam said, and her voice shook. "So much hatred in one house! She made my grandfather Trueblood bring their bodies back and they're buried there at Tamarack."

"But who was she, Gam," I said, "this Elizabeth Stearns?"

"Why, she was old Israel's fourth wife, my grandfather's stepmother, you see. She never would sleep one night in the main house, my father said, no one knew why. She made old Israel add on that east wing before she would marry him." She stared at me, troubled. "But once she died, *nobody* was to lock those doors ever again, my father said, and Henry—Henry agreed . . ."

I suspected what distressed her the most might be the realization that Tamarack was slipping away from her forever, that others, who had much less right to it than she,

who had no real right, were already doing as they pleased with the house, and soon old customs would be forgotten and she and Ismay, Trueblood and Israel might never have existed. To divert her from any such melancholy train of thought, I said, "I'm intrigued by the man you call 'old Israel'. *Israel Carson*—that's an unusual name, isn't it?"

"Not for those times." Gam gave me a faint smile. "At least his parents spared him Peace-and-Plenty, or Safe-on-High. I had a schoolmate called Sin-No-More. I used to wonder how his mother could keep a straight face when she called him to supper: 'You get in here this minute, Sin-No-More!'"

For a giddy moment we were both back at the River House, sharing a joke over the tea cakes.

I said, "I can't help wondering where he got his wealth. Tamarack must have cost a fortune, even in those days."

"Nobody talked about where *Israel Carson's* money came from, so I don't rightly know. I always suspected he sold cattle to the British; it would be just like him, from all I heard. And it was right after that, right after the war, he started building the main house. But I never asked. It was something the family was ashamed of, that I knew, although they were glad enough to have the house and the land and the money old *Israel* left them."

She closed her eyes and lay very still. Perhaps I ought to go, I thought, or I too will tire her out. But she must have been drawing on some as yet untapped source of strength, for when she opened her eyes they were brighter than before, and her voice stronger.

"He was a hard man, *Emelie*, as was his grandson *Ismay*, my father. I've always thought the *Carson* men are like rocks. Some are slate, easily broken. And others are granite. *Israel* was granite. My brother *Luke*—" her voice trembled over the word, giving it a special luster—" *Luke* was slate, as was *Trueblood*, *Israel's* son. I don't know what those who died at *Gettysburg* were like—*Israel's* sons who died there. And *Henry*, of course . . . *Henry* was flint. I wouldn't give you two cents for most of the *Carson* men, *Emelie*, but I suppose that's because I side with the women. The women who married *Carson* men."

I said, "I don't know anything about them."

"They must have regretted it, every one. As for the

Carson women who marry, it always ends in disaster, doesn't it? Death, or divorce, or a long, loveless union. I was lucky, I daresay, because I didn't marry."

I thought (not for the first time) how often it is that very old women are unmarried. It's a statistical commonplace that married men live longer than bachelors; on the other hand, the really durable females, whose lives crawl close to the century mark, either preferred not to marry, or marriage just isn't as good for a woman as it is for a man—not as beneficial, somehow.

Gam turned back to me and said, "We Carson women are cursed with a long life. Beware the road you set out on, child, if you intend to walk it alone."

I was searching for words to explain that it was hardly of my choosing if my journey threatened to be a solitary one, when the nurse came bustling in with a tray.

"Time for our tea and a wee bite of something! Can we manage by ourselves today?" She began to grind the bed up.

"We have only one cup!" Gam said acidly. "We're to take turns, is that it?"

There ensued a brief battle of wills that ended with Gam exhausted but clearly the victor. The nurse returned with a second cup of weak tea and a plate with two dry salt-free crackers.

Gam's hands shook as she lifted her cup. I sipped my tea and searched desperately for something to say.

"And your husband?" Gam said suddenly. "How is he?"

I was taken aback. "B-but, Gam darling, I don't have a husband. We—we divorced—you remember—"

"Of course I remember," she said tartly. "I don't remember everything, but I'm not likely to forget that, am I?" My face flamed; I said nothing. She added uncertainly, "I think there was something else . . . Now don't hurry me . . . Oh, yes!" And she looked at me with eyes like the Gam I had known: absorbed in the present, milking every moment of 'all its juices', as she used to say. "He's dead, isn't he? He died—"

"Yes," I said.

"Somebody sent me the clipping. He was certainly young to die, Emelie. He must have been just a boy."

My mouth went dry. "He was twenty."

No, by the time of his death Bard had had his birthday—he was twenty-one. As if that made any difference.

"Dead at twenty," Gam whispered. "Luke was twenty . . . did he have the fever too?"

"No," I said, "Bard had . . . an accident, Gam."

"Yes, I remember now. It told all about it in that piece in the paper. He was shot, wasn't he? That's what it said. 'Self-inflicted gunshot wound,'" she went on, and I knew she didn't mean to be cruel, it was just that she *did* remember—it was a kind of boasting, that was all. "Word has been received of the recent death of the husband of a former resident," she said, as if she were reading aloud at the breakfast table. "The death was caused by a self-inflicted gunshot . . ." She paused. "Oh, my dear," she said in a trembling voice.

"It was ridiculous to call me a former resident," I said. "I was five years old when we moved away."

"Oh, my dear, my dear," Gam whispered. She squeezed her eyes shut. "I had forgotten—"

"It's all right, Gam," I said steadily. "He . . . wasn't my husband then, you know." As if that made any difference . . .

"As if that makes any difference!" Gam said. "As if that helps at all!"

I said with difficulty, "The whole clipping was a passel of inaccuracies and best forgotten."

Self-inflicted gunshot wound . . . it wasn't even that, Gam, I thought. They didn't even have it right how Bard died. Perhaps they thought it would read better that way than to tell the truth of it. 'Death by his own hand'—that would have been better. No ugly details, just the bare bones of the truth. Factual: decent: unbearable.

Bard! Oh, my God! Bard!

"Emelie," Gam said, "I'm very old, you know. I'm ninety-eight years old. *Ninety-eight*. I'm sick, and I don't know what ails me. They won't tell me anything, they treat me like a child. I can't seem to throw it off, and I don't think I'm going to be able to. I think I'm going to die, Emelie, and that's why for the first time in my whole life, that's why I don't get any better."

"Oh, Gam," I said helplessly. I couldn't say, "Of course you're not going to die," because that wouldn't be true; it wasn't true of any of us, I thought. Besides, I

thought she *was* going to die, and it seemed to me that if you're ninety-eight years old, it's time nobody lied to you.

"So I want you to tell me all about it," she said. "I want to know what happened. I may be going to die, but I'm not dead *yet*. You tell me all about it, Emelie—it will be our secret."

"You don't want to know what happened, Gam!" I said. "Please let's not talk about Bard's death!"

"Not his *death*," Gam said fretfully. "Of course I don't want to talk about that—I'm sick to death of death!"

I was the one who was tired, now, and confused. I said dully, "He wasn't my husband any longer." As if that mattered . . .

"That's it—that's what I want to know about," Gam said. "You were married three months, and then you divorced. That's right, isn't it? Three months? I just couldn't understand it. It isn't like you, Emelie, to be that flighty."

"Oh, Gam," I said, "what did you know about what I'm likely to do, or not do? You hadn't laid eyes on me for a dozen years—I could be as flighty as a flock of sparrows."

"The last time I laid eyes on you," Gam said, "we had tea at the foot of the garden. Do you remember? Just you, and I, and that rag doll of yours, and Sam, your cat."

"Of course I remember." It was like taking a long look over my shoulder at Heaven, at Heaven seen through the gates closing. "The peonies were in bloom," I said, "those great white ones with the blood-red petals in the center."

"Festiva Maxima," Gam said. I wondered if she, too, could smell them now—their heavy scent, sweet, sweet, summer-sweet, their stems bending beneath the explosion of petals. "They were always your favorites. Like the York and Lancaster roses, and those daffodils, several on a stem—"

"Thalia," I said, when she hesitated, and was able to return her smile: Gam had insisted that I learn the names of her flowers. The daffodils had danced beside the path all the way to the river—had waded in violets all the way. Did a child go down that path now? I wondered. Wandered dreamily (as had I) on a summer's day, all the world smelling so sweet, the birds silent, busy with their hungry broods . . . lovely days, sweet lovely *safe* days . . . tea ready, and cakes, and grown-up china cups,

thin and fragile as daffodil petals. And at home, my mother waiting, safe and alive, my father safe, strong, alive. And somewhere, in a town I had not yet heard of, was a boy I did not yet know existed. What was happening to him that would turn him into the Bardwell Milne I had married? Been so briefly married to . . .

"And you never changed your mind," Gam was saying. "You chose your favorite and you stuck by your choice. That doll—you read to it, and took it with you on our walks . . ."

Annie . . . my doll's name was Annie, and she had been in the suitcase under my bed—poor, battered, beloved lump of rags, waiting (I'd hoped) to meet my own child some day. That suitcase . . . nothing in it of the slightest value to anyone but me: Annie, and a plaster cast of Sam's right front paw, the album of snapshots, and some sketches Bard had done of me in sepia wash . . . gone, stolen, and probably by now at the bottom of the Charles.

"You were always a stubborn, loyal child, Emelie, and people don't change that much, not in *two* dozen years. It isn't like you to be divorced at all. Or did he divorce you? Was that the way of it?"

"No, I did the divorcing," I said wearily. "But he could just as well have divorced me. It didn't make any difference, really."

"It's usual for the wife to get the divorce, no matter who's at fault," Gam said. "I expect it causes less talk that way."

Was she looking for diversion—did she think of my marriage as a kind of soap opera? Not happening to real people? No one suffering, no one humiliated, no real anguish, no real grief?

"No one was at fault," I said huskily. "Or rather we both were."

When I said no more: "I want to *know*, Emelie." It was a plea: *throw me a lifeline, I'm drowning . . . share your life with me, I have so little time left . . .*

I wanted to tell her. Dear God, I wanted to tell *somebody*, share with *somebody*; what I had told no one, not even the judge. And Gam was safe: it would be like putting a confession under a cornerstone.

"We got divorced," I said, "because he—because *we*

thought it would cause less talk than an annulment. We could have had an annulment, you see."

"Go on," said Gam. Her eyes were sharp.

"We could have had an annulment because we didn't have a marriage." I wondered if it would be all right to take a sip of water from Gam's glass. Bard not looking at me. Not answering when I spoke. Not touching me . . . "He never—we never—consummated the marriage." I ran my tongue over my lips. "Do you understand, Gam?"

"I know what you mean," Gam said tartly. "I may be nearly one hundred years old, but I haven't lost my wits." After a pause, she added surprisingly, "It's been no concern of mine for a long, long time, but I remember . . . I remember. I am a Carson woman, after all. There was a time when it was the most important . . . when it was nearly everything . . ."

"Love, you mean?"

"Not love," she said impatiently. "Sex. Isn't that the word nowadays? A man's need for a woman. A woman's need for a man. Do I shock you? I'm old—I can say what I like. I don't have time to pick and choose my words—I can't be bothered!"

"Yes," I said, "that's the word. But that's not—" It was much harder to put into words than I expected. "We did love each other, Gam, that was what was so awful. I *loved* Bard, that's why I couldn't stand it, and I'm afraid he loved me, too—that's why he did what he did. After I left him. After I divorced him."

And I twisted Bard's ring on my finger . . . the ring I had taken off when I divorced him, and put back on when he killed himself. As if by that act he had finally made me his.

Chapter Nine



When I left Boston, I had not planned to be away more than the one night, and I had not brought much money, on the sound principle that if I didn't have it with me I wouldn't spend it. However, my last visit with Gam had such an unsatisfactory ending—the nurse had come bustling in and abruptly sent me packing; I was not to show my face until after lunch tomorrow, she declared, which would “give us time to starch up our spine”; and Gam, motionless, eyes half closed, had trembled as if she would weep when I kissed her cheek—no, I had to say goodbye on a happier note than this. So I counted what was left of my funds, and saw that if the \$5 cot-plus-breakfast were still available at Whittakers', and if I ate very lightly tonight and tomorrow noon, I should have enough for cab fare back to White River Junction and maybe even for a bite of something when I got to Boston.

Luckily, Mrs. Whittaker had assumed I was staying the weekend. A slender woman in her early forties, she had sleek gray hair cut short and brushed toward her face like a helmet of polished pewter. She wore a long tube of wool jersey, an elaborate silver necklace fashioned like a flight of swallows, and a good deal of turquoise eye shadow that set off her brilliant blue eyes.

“Are you at loose ends, Mrs. Milne?” She gave me a searching look. “I loathe strange towns after dark, don't you? Come along to the Gallery—we're having a preview for a pair of rather amusing glassblowers. I'll wait while you freshen up.”

I explained awkwardly that I had not expected to stay over, and had brought nothing suitable.

“My dear, they wear everything imaginable, from patched jeans and bare feet to Pucci silks and diamonds. Do come! There's nothing else doing in Welkin, I assure you!”

Feeling like a stray kitten let in to the warmth, I accepted her invitation gratefully.

It turned out that Mrs. Whittaker was the owner and director of Greenstone Gallery, a shop specializing in the work of local artists. "But we're not parochial," she declared. "We make the term elastic enough to cover anyone who alights, however briefly, anywhere in the state. Which is overrun with artists, as perhaps you've noticed, so we can be quite picky and choosy. We do try to stay away from the three B's—you know, birches, barns, and covered bridges—" she was backing expertly into a cramped parking space—"but one mustn't be prejudiced against the tourists' tastes, and besides, it all helps to pay the rent."

I could hear the mutter of water in the darkness; the building might once have been a grist mill. The gallery itself occupied a lofty space cut by portable dividers into a series of roomy niches. The air was layered with smoke and hummed with high-pitched voices. Three-B accents, I thought, amused: Boston, Bar Harbor, and Bennington.

I sipped white wine and nibbled tidbits and felt pleasantly invisible. The Gallery had an air of established status and financial success; I suspected that Mrs. Whittaker's brains fully matched the perfection of her appearance. On every vertical surface hung graphics and paintings in a creditable diversity of techniques. True, the glass objects were not much more than "amusing"—they were scarcely useful and not always beautiful—but there was a vitality and a sense of spontaneous delight in their design that should make them salable, I thought, though their prices were staggering, even by Boston standards.

I was playing my favorite game—if I could have but one item here, and that as a gift, which would I choose?—when I came round the end of a partition and found myself face to face with the Venus of the Flytraps.

She wore a gown of green silk so pale it was almost white, and her hair, smoothed back from her perfect brow, was pale as moonlight. Knotted about her throat and hanging almost to her waist was a truly magnificent string of jade. She was decidedly not of the Attic School of dress, and Gordon Fenwick, on whose arm her slender hand rested lightly, was clearly dazzled by her.

"Why, Cousin Emelie!" he said heartily. "Well, I *am* in luck! Both my charming cousins! Here, you two girls

ought to get acquainted. Merrill, this is your cousin Emelie Milne—you know, Charles's daughter. Emelie, Merrill is—just a sec, now, I have to get this straight—Merrill is your great-great-grandfather's great-granddaughter. Old Ismay Carson—yes, that's your link!"

I remembered her name, now. Mrs. Something-or-other Broome. "How do you do, Mrs. Broome?" I said cordially.

Clearly she had no recollection of ever having laid eyes on me. "How do you do, Miss Milne?" she murmured, and gave Gordon Fenwick a frosty glance; I could see he had not endeared himself by stressing the generational gap between us. Although she's not all that much older than I, I thought. Thirty, perhaps. Not enough older to justify the icy flash of temper those green eyes had shot at poor floundering Fenwick.

"Mrs. Milne," he said wretchedly. "Emelie's husband, too, has passed away, Merrill dear."

"My sympathy, Mrs. Milne . . . Oh, there's Dixon!"

Her manner as she moved away was so blatantly dismissive, it seemed as if through some strange refraction of our minds I could see myself as she must: an inconvenient arrival in a crumpled slacks suit, a dowdy nuisance with nondescript pale orange hair and not enough make-up to conceal fatigue. Dixon Mansfield, catching my eyes upon him as Merrill greeted him affectionately, glanced away quickly; then, almost at once, he gave me a little nod and an apologetic smile.

Just so had my friends behaved after my parents' death: as if the sight of me were an unwelcome reminder that we all live in jeopardy of losing those we love. After Bard's, no one had bothered to try to erase that first flinching, but had looked through me, over me, beyond me.

Surely nothing of that sort could have caused Dixon Mansfield's embarrassment. What, then? He and Merrill must have known each other all their lives; he was her uncle—it was only natural there should be affection between them. Still, she *had* contested Henry's Will, and this had kept Gam from going home to Tamarack. Had Dixon sided with Merrill or with Gam? Perhaps he was completely neutral: he liked Merrill, and Gam, and me, and perhaps even Gordon, though he thought him a fool . . . No, it was Gam who said that . . .

I didn't care, really, how it was. I was tired, and longed for my cot, and quiet, and sleep, and I made my excuses to Mrs. Whittaker and slipped away. I had no appetite for supper and went directly to my room and was asleep when my roommates came in; very sound asleep, I guess, because I never heard them, but slept through until morning.

After a heartier breakfast than I had any right to expect—"But it's Sunday!" Mrs. Whittaker said gaily, as if that were a reason—I thanked her once again for her kindness; I then set out to stroll about Welkin and somehow pass the time until I could see Gam.

The morning was cool and a thin mist loitered beneath the trees. Just beyond the bridge a bell began to stroke the air; the sound was melancholy in the extreme, awakening memories of Sunday mornings long ago. I toyed with the notion of attending church—that would dispose of at least an hour—but dismissed the idea as dangerous, for I am notoriously vulnerable to organ music. Then, feeling challenged, I went quickly up the walk and slipped into a rear pew.

The ornate stone interior was so unlike the severe wooden box of a church I had known in Ohio that homesickness and grief could not creep up this red-carpeted aisle or slide in beside me on the cushioned pew. My composure safe, I watched the arrival of the congregation as if it were a pageant put on for my diversion: Dixon Mansfield as the Dignified Usher, Gordon Fenwick the Considerate Husband (he proceeds slowly up the aisle with a frail woman clinging to his arm), Merrill Broome the Exquisite Widow (in black, pearls at her throat, hat and muff of sable).

As the service moved placidly into the sermon, I was admiring the stained-glass windows with their barefoot maidens clutching sheaves of lilies when I observed with a start of surprise that the lady frolicking on bluebells was—not a realistic portrait surely?—an ancestress of mine: *In Loving Memory of Elizabeth Stearns Carson, 1813-1905*. Gam comes by her longevity honestly, I reflected. And then I thought, no, that's not her forebear, nor mine either. Elizabeth Stearns was the fourth wife, the one whose sons died at Gettysburg. Gam was Ismay's daughter, who was Trueblood's son, who was—whose? Is-

rael's, of course, but who was his mother? I didn't think Gam had told me . . . or had she?

And then I heard in my mind's ear but as clearly as if spoken aloud: "*Emelie—*" And it was Gam's voice.

With a muttered apology I slid past the woman at the end of the pew and slipped out the door. I seemed to be under some sort of compulsion, for I began to run. When I reached Années d'Or I did not use the main entrance, but hurried up the drive to the hospital wing, where I found the door unlocked and the corridor empty.

Gam was alone. At the sound of my step she opened her eyes; at the sight of me they filled with tears.

"Emelie!" she whispered. "I've been hoping you'd come . . . I wanted to tell you . . . to ask you . . . not to be cross with me . . ."

"Cross with you, Gam?" I felt like crying. "How could I ever be cross with you?"

"When the Will is read . . . believe I love you . . ."

As her meaning sank in, I felt nothing so much as irrational relief. Good—*good!* So Gam wasn't leaving Tamarack to me, and I wouldn't have any reason whatsoever to be glad when she died. Leave me nothing but the memory of you, I thought. Leave me the memories of all the joys we shared. *But leave me at least that much . . . Oh Bard, Bard—you left me nothing—nothing at all!*

"I could never be angry with you, Gam," I said, and my voice broke. "I *know* you love me—you don't have to prove it!"

Gam stared at me for a moment, apprehensively, as if I were a stranger. Then: "You look like her," she muttered. "God help you . . . God save you . . ."

"Who, Gam?"

"Her . . . Emelie . . ." Then her face cleared. "That makes it right, then . . ." Her voice was so faint I could hardly make out the words; her breath rattled in her throat. "I've always . . . hated goodbyes. I've said . . . what I had to say . . . now run along . . ."

I struggled to keep my voice steady. "No," I said, "I'm the one who waves until the plane takes off. I stand right there until it's safely over the horizon."

For some minutes she lay with her eyes closed. Then she raised the lids once again, as if they were very heavy; I could see she was already far away. Then for a moment

she was back—it was as if she was at the window of the plane, and through its thick glass had recognized me standing there, foreshortened, far below, and she had waved, a final, quick, impatient wave.

“Why, Luke!” Gam said clearly, in a welcoming voice.

And then she was airborne. Her plane turned into the light, and rose on the wind, and was gone over the horizon. I still held her hand in mine, but it was no one’s hand any more.

Chapter Ten



Now began the stately pavane of bereavement and burial.

“I’ll call Bennett’s,” Mrs. Spindler said. “Would you care to choose the coffin, Mrs. Milne?”

Taken aback, I shot a bewildered glance at Dixon Mansfield.

“I think we can leave that to Bennett,” Mr. Mansfield said smoothly. “Martha left quite explicit directions how she would like her funeral conducted. If it is agreeable to you, my dear, we will simply follow them, insofar as possible.”

“Surely no one would object to anything Gam wanted!” I said.

All in all, I found myself so much more an onlooker than a participant, I suspected Dixon Mansfield was trying to spare me as one over-familiar with such desolate planning.

“Wednesday, then,” he said. “At eleven, if the church is free. Gordon, I’ve written out an obituary that is, I hope, all-inclusive. Get copies off to the *Horizon*, the *Herald*, and of course the *Times*. Now, my dear, shall I see to the flowers?”

“Please.” I added painfully, “Eleven is cutting it awfully close, Mr. Mansfield. I have to work tomorrow and Tuesday, and I don’t think the first bus on Wednesday leaves before eight.”

I wondered if they thought me callous. But Dillman's had been decidedly chilly at my taking Friday and Saturday. Wednesday by itself would be bad enough; to come earlier—no, I didn't see how I could. I couldn't afford to lose any more pay, but it wasn't only that. I really was afraid they might fire me, and I didn't know where I might find another job offering even so tentative a toehold in my chosen field. Gam, I felt, would understand. I could hear her clearly: "Speak up, child! Folks aren't mind readers, you know!"

"I could surely be here by noon," I said shakily.

"Twelve o'clock then," Dixon Mansfield said, "and the reading of the Will at three."

Gordon Fenwick's face went dull red, and he sucked in his lips.

I was right about Dillman's: they did indeed take a most frosty view of my request for another day free, and so soon. What my job required was not so much talent as reliability, they said. Surely I understood Dillman's could not be expected to order its affairs for my convenience? I felt sick with humiliation. Dear *God*, I thought, I wish I didn't have to *crawl* in order to live!

"I'm sorry you find a death in my family so inconvenient," I said through stiff lips. "Since there is nothing you can say that will keep me from taking Wednesday, perhaps you would prefer to replace me at once!" I sound like a parody of Dixon Mansfield, I thought, and fought down a laugh.

It wasn't as if I had lost a parent, they said, merely a rather distant connection, wasn't that correct?

Intoxicated by anger and grief, I said, "What is at issue is my self-respect! I would be obliged if you notify Personnel I am leaving at the end of the day. Or I can leave now!"

They gaped at me as if I were a mouse that had turned and snarled at them, and I shared their astonishment. I seemed to have become two people, the one behaving boldly and recklessly, the other watching in helpless disapproval. I'm out of my mind, I thought; I'm literally beside myself. It's shock, I suppose. Gam was all I had . . . all I had! The last link with my childhood . . . the last one to whom I really mattered.

No doubt I could get a job at Greenstone Gallery, I thought, as I feverishly swept the contents of my desk into a sack. Surely I could coo the proper sentiments to coax tourists into buying. It wasn't until I was on my way home across the Common that I sobered down enough to realize that if I *didn't* get anything at the Gallery (or anywhere else) I was ineligible for unemployment pay, having quit. It would have been prudent to wait until they fired me on Thursday. No, better this way—now I wouldn't have to keep going and coming, wasting money on buses and cabs. Besides, I'd rather *do* than *be done to*; I'd been *done to* long enough.

I provided myself with cartons and twine, and packed, and ate a meager and somewhat frightened supper. And in the morning, Tuesday morning, I went to the bank and took out all my savings, which came to a little over three hundred dollars. Then I dragged my boxes to the door, and handed over my key. I was as glad to see the last of Mrs. Blaikson as she was of me.

Vermont had had a heavy rain on Monday, and the crush of tourists had started to abate. I was surprised, therefore, and dismayed to find Whittakers' full up. "Sorry, but we've got foliage freaks here right through Sunday," her son told me. "Mom's at the Gallery—maybe she knows of a place."

Rather than pay the cab to drive me all over town, I thought I'd leave my boxes at the tourist rescue mission while I looked for a room. They confirmed that the waning tide of the tourists still filled the town to overflowing; they did not know what to suggest. If I returned later, something might have turned up; meanwhile they'd keep an eye on my boxes.

Mrs. Whittaker was welcoming, warm, friendly, and discouraging. A furnished room? Good heavens, there was no such thing in Welkin! Not snatched up, that is. Perhaps I could find someone who needed a housesitter, although those jobs, too, were no sooner announced than taken. She herself already had someone lined up for when she left on the fifteenth of October. "We close the Gallery until the skiers come. But look, my dear, if you can't find anything for tonight, don't despair—there's always my sofa."

With sinking spirits I returned to Tourist Rescue. I was

in luck, they told me. The Welkin Inn had a cancellation for a single room and it was only thirty dollars—did I want it?

"Thirty—" I swallowed hard. But I couldn't impose on the Whittakers, not when I wasn't absolutely broke. Surely I would find something cheaper before my money ran out . . . which would be in about a week, at this rate. Say eight days, if I didn't eat very much. Nine, if I didn't eat at all.

I lugged my three boxes one at a time across the Green to the Welkin Inn, where a surprised bellhop transported them to my room. I don't know what surprised him more, the fact that they *were* boxes, or the variation in their weight: the box with my books was exceedingly heavy, the one with my plants exceedingly light.

Wednesday dawned bright and cold. Over coffee and rolls in the little café, I perused the help-wanted ads in this week's *Horizon*. A farmer needed a man skilled in pipeline-milking. A garage needed an expert mechanic. Two families with elderly relatives would like someone to come in and read aloud. No one needed a salesgirl or a waitress or even that standby of romantic fiction, a governess. The job market in Welkin was as bleak as in Boston. . . . But of course the *Horizon* was just a small-town weekly. There would be the state-wide dailies; there would be employment agencies . . . And there was nothing that said I had to stay in Welkin.

I spent the rest of the morning making inquiries. Well before noon I was back at the Inn, to change into the plain black frock I had worn at Dillman's. I hadn't any hat, but I pinned my hair up—it looked less frivolous that way—and I put on my coat, a practical black wool of conservative cut. Now my gloves, and I was ready. Gam, I felt, would approve of my appearance. A lady, she told me once, must be neat, clean, and *unremarkable*.

I really don't remember much about Gam's funeral, the actual service, I mean. I remember the church was full. I remember flowers everywhere in stiff, formal bouquets. I remember Merrill in black and sables but no pearls. And Gordon, strange in a solemn dark suit, but not his wife. "Mrs. Fenwick doesn't attend funerals," Dixon Mansfield whispered. Grace and William were there, tight-mouthed and withdrawn; I saw them turn to look at me as I came

in on the arm of Mr. Mansfield, past the rows and rows of faces. Most of all, I remember the organ playing softly, insinuatingly, sliding its music under my skin; I remember the prayers which clutch at the heart. And then, unbidden, unwanted, the tears came and I grieved for Gam, and for my parents, and for Bard. I buried them all, I buried each one, all over again.

When the service was over and Gam had been rolled back down the aisle as overhead the tolling bell began to count the years of her life, I stood on the church steps while her new bronze cocoon was eased into the waiting hearse. The people came out, nodding and greeting each other as if the funeral of Martha Stark Carson were a social occasion of considerable note; and some of them chatted with Dixon, and some of them murmured to Merrill, and some of them silently wrung Gordon's hand, but although they stared at me curiously none of them spoke to me, and I was thankful.

I had dried my eyes and quite recovered my composure when Justin St. John, among the last to leave the church, came out and stopped in front of me. I hadn't known he was there, and I almost didn't recognize him in his conventional dark suit and black tie.

"I hesitate to intrude at a time of such convincing grief," he said, and for a moment I felt as if he had pushed me off balance. He couldn't have said it . . . he *did* say it, but didn't realize . . . But he was going on, smoothly, softly, as if consoling me. "I am wondering if you would dine with me tonight. I have, as you know, a lease that runs through the month of October. I am hoping it will be convenient for you to honor it. I would like to discuss it with you somewhat less publicly."

I said coldly, "What has your lease to do with me?"

"It always saves time, I think, to deal directly with headquarters." He smiled thinly. "Which I am willing to wager anything you like will turn out to be you. Shall we say the Welkin Inn at seven?"

A wave of sheer fury swept over me. To talk in such a way, to say such things now, here, at this time when already the cortège was forming, when everybody's eyes were on us . . . how barbaric he was! What a barbarian!

I said in a trembling voice, "You may find this hard to understand, Mr. St. John, but there are *some* things on

which I don't care to place bets, and what my grandaunt Martha saw fit to leave me is one of them. I happen to know Gam did not leave Tamarack to me, as why should she? And it is *disgusting* of you to speculate about a matter that is no concern of yours!"

"But it does concern me, Mrs. Milne," he said in the same low, courteous voice. "I agree there is no reason why she should have left Tamarack to you, but she did. Seven o'clock then." And he handed me into the limousine drawn up behind the hearse.

Now came the familiar coda: drive sedately to the cemetery; wait until the coffin is wheeled into position; gather close and stare at nothing while the last prayers are said; accept a small spade of soil and scatter it on the coffin—I assumed Gam had asked that I perform this symbolic ritual, which I did as I had for my parents: I poured the soil into my palm, handed back the spade, and gathering the soil I sprinkled it gently back and forth, as if I were covering some minute, tender seed. I was afraid Gordon Fenwick was going to come over and speak to me but I did not want to speak to anyone and turned away, and saw in the small crowd of mourners Mr. St. John regarding me with a bold look of sardonic approval.

On the short drive from the cemetery, to hold tears at bay I retreated behind idle, irrelevant thoughts. What a pity St. John's behavior fell so far short of his appearance. . . . He must have rented his suit, like a bridegroom of modest means. . . . But it hadn't fitted like a rented garment. . . . That phrase he had used: ". . . *convincing grief* . . ." Dear God, did he think my tears were fake? Did he think I was acting? Was he—that sardonic look rankled—was he applauding what he considered an expert performance? I was *glad* I would dine with him, in that case! I would watch and I would wait, and if he hinted that such was indeed his evaluation of me, I would . . . I would let him know how *barbaric* I found him!

We had arrived at Dixon Mansfield's for the funeral collation.

Mr. Mansfield had invited Merrill, Gordon, the Rowdons (Grace and William) and myself to join him. In a sort of unreal conviviality we helped ourselves to crab soufflé and sipped glasses of wine; and then we filed self-consciously into his office and seated ourselves on the

leather chairs that formed a semicircle around his desk. Like in a play, I thought; I didn't know people really did this. Mr.—what *was* his name?—my father's lawyer—had called on me, read over my father's simple wishes, and that was that. After Bard, no one had done anything, I mean it had nothing to do with me, I mean everyone knew I was nothing to him and his parents had not even written me—why should they?

"'In the name of God, Amen,'" said Dixon Mansfield, and cleared his throat. "Martha was . . . of another century," he said softly. "'In the name of God, Amen. Naturally I hereby revoke all previous Wills, and it goes without saying this is my last Will and Testament.'" Glancing up, he added in a dry voice, "Perhaps I should mention that the wording and intent of this document are entirely Martha's. I am responsible only for its legality." He tapped the papers into alignment, as if, by neatening their edges, he could mold their contents into more conventional form.

"'Article One. I hereby direct my executors to pay all my lawful debts, and when these have been discharged, and the Federal Government has collected its bandit's share, I direct that what's left of my possessions be disposed of as follows:—'" He paused. "The next three articles are bequests to charities, rather modest, as befitted Miss Martha's philosophy, and unless there is an objection, I will skip these."

No one objected.

"'Article Five. To William Rowdon, for whom I have already made what I hope is adequate provision in the form of a pension, the sum of one thousand dollars, to be set aside until needed to pay his burial costs. For forty years William kept telling me, 'You'll be the death of me yet.' Having now the last word, I'd like to point out that *he* has survived *me*, as I knew all along he would.'"

William Rowdon's face went brick red, and there were tears in his eyes.

"'Article Six. To Grace Rowdon, also (I hope) adequately pensioned, the sum of one thousand dollars for the same purpose.

"'Article Seven. To Gordon Fenwick, grandson of my half-sister Antoinette, the house and land consisting of the real property known as the River House.

“‘Article Eight. To Dixon Mansfield and to Charles Carson, the contents of the wine cellar in the River House, to be equally divided between them.’”

I heard my father's name with a sense of shock. Gam must have written this Will before his death, more than a year ago . . . When had I written her? I couldn't remember.

“‘. . . to Merrill, née Mansfield, granddaughter of my half-brother Henry, my forgiveness for her greed which, driving her to contest Henry's Will, prevented me from returning to my beloved Tamarack, in token of which I leave her the contents of the River House, with the exception of the contents of the wine cellar and the items listed in the following Article.’”

I didn't dare look at Merrill. She was sitting tense and motionless as a cat ready to spring.

“‘Article Ten. To Emelie, née Carson, great-granddaughter of my beloved brother Luke, I give whatever else of which I die possessed, in this manner:

“‘Whatever securities and savings remain after my debts, taxes, and other bequests are paid, and the items of furniture from the River House, listed herewith, and their contents, to wit:

“‘My mother's marble-topped dresser, her rosewood Belter parlor set, consisting of the sofa, two arm chairs, and the lady chair, her Eli Terry pillar-and-scroll clock, and her mahogany quartetto tables.

“‘My grandmother's Hepplewhite clothes press, her Sheraton fall-front desk, her marble-topped side table—’”

I could not listen any longer. Whatever had Gam been thinking of? What would I *do* with so much? For it seemed to me, as Dixon Mansfield's voice went on and on, that Gam must be giving me all those great Victorian pieces that had so intimidated me as a child, those ponderous, ornate, exceedingly expensive-looking cupboards and bureaus and wardrobes with which the River House had been crowded. She was giving me everything of any value. In my mind's eye I could see the brass inlays, the sphinx feet, the deep, elaborate carvings; each was a museum piece and no doubt worth a great deal on the collectors' market. It was embarrassing . . . it was indecent . . . oh, would he *never* stop?

"... and her Sheraton china cabinet with the Spode dessert service with the painted birds.

" 'All these are to be Emelie's outright.' "

He paused, and there was a brief silence so electric it almost crackled. I kept my eyes on my hands, clenched in my lap. *Oh, Gam, what have you done? These are my last living relations anywhere in the world, and now I shall always be a stranger here . . . resented . . . if possible, eased out, like Gam . . . displaced.*

But Dixon Mansfield was continuing.

" 'To Emelie I give also the use for five years of the house and land known as Tamarack. At the end of five years Tamarack will become hers absolutely if she has fulfilled the conditions that I have spelled out in a letter to Dixon Mansfield, the contents of which I direct him to communicate to Emelie and Emelie only. Should she die during these five years, Tamarack shall become the property of the eldest of her children. Should she be unwilling or unable for any reason to fulfill the conditions according to the letter I have referred to, or should she die childless, Tamarack shall revert to my estate and pass to my next of kin. I don't care a fig whether that heir be the grandson of my half-sister or the granddaughter of my half-brother; let them have the property appraised and the one that keeps the realty is to pay the other one-half its fair market value, but who keeps and who sells they are to decide between them, for I cannot; between Gordon and Merrill I have never been able to discern a straw's weight of difference.

" 'Lastly, I appoint Dixon Mansfield executor of this Will.' "

Merrill gave a little trill of laughter. "Dear Aunt Martha has generously left me the contents of her kitchen!"

Gordon glanced at her, flushed, glanced away. "I—uh—I'd like to know what Emelie has to *do*, to get Tamarack, I mean."

Dear God, I thought for what I swear was the very first time, *Tamarack is mine! Mine! I can't believe it!* But I did believe it; my heart was pounding with shameless exultation.

"Of course you want to know," Merrill said. "You're entitled to know, Gordon, and so am I! It's only fair,

Dixon dear, that Gordon and I be able to estimate our chances—" she cast a cat's smile at me—"of inheriting in Emelie's stead. She is obligingly a widow, so we aren't likely to find ourselves faced with an heir presumptive!"

The Rowdons were looking at her as if she were something they were expected to clean out of a cellar.

"Nothing very difficult," Mr. Mansfield said in some embarrassment. "Martha wanted Tamarack to go to someone who would cherish it as she did. I'm afraid that's all I can say. Naturally when the five years are up, the alternate heirs may quite properly request proof that the conditions have been met."

"I suppose the Will is in order?"

Dixon Mansfield said evenly, "The Will may be holographic—that is, written entirely by the testatrix in her own hand—nevertheless I am certain it would stand up in court."

Merrill smiled sweetly. "Your Wills always do, don't they? Odd she should mention Charles—hasn't he been dead some time?"

"Not quite a year and a half," I said clearly.

"She signed it a little over a month ago, on August tenth," Mr. Mansfield said. "With the exception of the Article that covers her bequest to Emelie, it's identical to the one she wrote two years ago, after Henry's Will was upheld. In the meantime her intent did not change in the slightest: what that one left to Emelie's father, this one leaves to Emelie." There was a hint of steel beneath his quiet words. "We must remember that the one great tragedy of her life was the disinheritance of her brother Luke, Emelie's great-grandfather. Obviously she is attempting to set matters right."

"You didn't drop *one* little hint that in your view this distribution is indecently unfair?"

"I admit I did feel Martha took your challenge of Henry's Will much too personally," Dixon Mansfield said. "I suggested she ought to let bygones be bygones. However, I could not persuade her, and certainly Martha has the right to leave her possessions to whom she wishes. As did Henry," he added levelly.

"*Dear* Dixon, how admirably judicial!" Merrill said, and he seemed to shrink under her mocking gaze.

"At least you could tell us who witnessed this damned Will," Gordon Fenwick said with some belligerence.

Mr. Mansfield peered at the stiff paper as if he did not quite know what he would find there. "Witnesses: Natalie Spindler, Bessie Crandall, and Justin Delacroix St. John."

"Justin!" Merrill gave another trill of laughter. "One would have hoped he'd have more—what shall I say?—*delicacy* than to witness a Carson Will!"

"It came about naturally enough," Mr. Mansfield said. "St. John wanted to rent Tamarack but Martha wouldn't hear of it. Gordon brought him around for approval, and after that he used to visit her off and on—I saw no harm in it, for she was lonely—and as it happened he was there the day she was to sign."

"Naturally!" Merrill was still smiling. She rose and began to draw on her gloves. "Yes, one can always count on Justin being *boringly* consistent. Invariably *so* partial to heiresses! I'm sure we all admired how attentive he was to dear Emelie after the funeral!"

Beneath her disappointment she must be furiously angry, not only with me, which was understandable, but also with Justin St. John. Why? Because he had witnessed the Will? That hardly seemed reason enough. As Merrill caught up her sables and swept out without so much as a glance, I wondered if she'd be less angry if she knew the "attentions" she seemed to resent so much had been nothing but an attempt to provoke me into betting I was the heir. But how underhanded of him, when he'd already seen the Will! Perhaps—obviously he and Merrill knew each other—perhaps he'd succeeded with Merrill where he'd failed with me, and *she* had wagered she'd won Tamarack, and now she'd lost twice over . . .

When we were alone, Mr. Mansfield reseated himself at his desk. "Now, my dear, let's take a look at Martha's letter. I think the simplest thing would be for you to read it, and then if you have any questions I'll try to answer them."

Gam's spidery handwriting was like her voice: dry, thin, elegant, yet clear. And gone . . . and silent now, I thought, and had to force myself to concentrate on what she'd written.

"... for five years from the day of my death Emelie

shall reside at Tamarack for half of each year, which time is to be spread evenly over the four seasons: that is to say, between December 21st and March 21st (Winter) she is to spend forty-five days at Tamarack; and again between March 21st and June 21st (Spring) . . .

I looked up. "Gam says I must stay at Tamarack six months a year. I have nowhere else—couldn't I live there all the time?"

"My dear child, of course you could! She simply wants to make sure you don't neglect it, or live elsewhere and not come to know it. I think she was a bit apprehensive you might prove—ah—"

"Flighty," I said.

He regarded me compassionately. "Martha dreaded that Tamarack would go to someone incapable of a deep attachment to the house, and to the land, too."

He knows about my divorce, I thought. "I already love Tamarack," I said, "and I've only been there once."

". . . assume responsibility for its upkeep and repair, keep an accounting of the costs, and personally attend to paying the bills."

"That about the bills is going to be difficult," I said ruefully. "I'm afraid I have very little money."

"I'll have the Will admitted to probate tomorrow morning, and then I can get at her box and see just what the situation is. It may not be as bad as you think."

"I was referring to my own savings, Mr. Mansfield," I said with a faint smile. "I haven't any idea what Gam left me. I just hope there's enough so I can stay at Tamarack and take care of it as Gam says I must."

"I hope so too," Mr. Mansfield said. "In order to have full title, I'm afraid you will have to fulfill Martha's stipulations to the letter. I'm very much concerned. The income from her securities has been plunging in recent months. As you may not realize, my dear, the country is in a severe recession."

"I do realize it, Mr. Mansfield," I said dryly. Because he seemed so troubled, I went on. "If worst came to worst, at the end of the five years I might sell a building lot or two, out of sight of the house where it wouldn't really matter, and meanwhile I could take out a loan, couldn't I?"

I wondered if I had shocked him, to speak so quickly

of selling any of Tamarack. Of course I wouldn't do it if I could avoid it, but surely anything was better than to lose Tamarack because I couldn't pay the taxes!

He shook his head, and looked very grave. "Read on a bit."

"In accordance with the stipulations in the Will of my half-brother Henry, the deed to Emelie must read that she shall be unable to parcel out Tamarack piece by piece by sale or gift, for the acreage must remain as she receives it; and so, in due time, must Tamarack be transferred by her, with the same restrictions against subdivision incorporated in the deed of sale or gift . . ."

I said slowly, "Obviously I'd better not count on the banks lending me any money."

"They wouldn't in any case. You have no security, my dear, because you don't own Tamarack—not yet. But we may be borrowing trouble prematurely," he went on with a falsely cheerful air. "Come and see me tomorrow about four o'clock. I should have a fairly clear idea of the situation by then."

I rose. "Mr. Mansfield, how soon could I move in? The Welkin Inn is much too expensive for me, but it's all I could find."

"As far as the law goes, tomorrow morning, as soon as the Will is admitted to probate. However, I must caution you that the house is in a sorry state and needs much to be done."

"It needs to be emptied, to begin with," I said bluntly. "What about this Mr. St. John? You say Gam didn't want him renting there, yet he says he is, and that he has a lease until the end of October."

"So he is, so he has. Martha told Gordon to let St. John live at Tamarack as her guest, but he insisted on paying a nominal rent. We never told Martha; it would have upset her to learn she couldn't afford to be generous. Till the end of October, you say? Excellent—then he'll be out in plenty of time for you to put in your requisite forty-five days during this fall. You want to be most scrupulous in fulfilling Martha's conditions—" He was fumbling among the papers on his desk. "Where—oh, here it is—" and he handed me an envelope inscribed to me in Gam's shakily elegant hand. "Martha wanted you to have this after you learned her terms. 'Heard about the hurdles,' was the way

she put it. She didn't want you angry with her, she said. You are to read it when you are alone."

"Angry—" I said in a low voice. We looked at each other helplessly, and I saw his eyes were as moist as mine.

It was not yet five o'clock when I left. I had Gam's letter safe in my handbag. When I read it that would be the last she would ever have to say to me; but until I read it, in a strange way she was still with me. I decided I would wait until I was in my room at the Welkin Inn before I opened the envelope, and meanwhile I had two hours before I'd be meeting Mr. St. John. The cemetery was only about a mile or so from the center of the village, and I thought I would go and say goodbye privately, alone, just the two of us, away from all those staring faces—go thank her for trusting Tamarack to me.

And so in the slanting golden sunlight I made my way along the leaf-strewn root-heaved sidewalk past the sprawling clapboarded houses, past *Années d'Or*, across the second bridge and along the highway where the houses stretch farther and farther apart, until I came to the gate with the wrought-iron arch overhead. I went along the curving drive between the hydrangeas with their great heavy blossoms large as human heads, and there was the raw oblong of newly heaped-up earth, and I was alone with Gam.

Or almost alone. Moving about in the thickening dusk was a workman of some sort—a sexton or gravedigger, I supposed from his rough clothing. I hoped he'd keep a bit farther off and leave us alone, but instead he came closer, slipping from one great bush to the next until he was not ten feet from the other side of Gam's grave. He had a shaggy halo of white hair beneath a red and black cap such as hunters sometimes wear, and appeared clean enough, though his jacket was patched with fabrics that bore no kinship in color or pattern to the garment they were making whole. A crisscrossing of leather thongs wrapped his trousers close to his legs, and his moccasins had a strangely animal look, for the fur had not been scraped off the leather before the footgear had been sewn up. His manner as he approached was oddly contradictory, as if he were docile yet independent; and as he took off his cap he stared at me with bright birdlike eyes as sharply as I was staring at him.

"She's here, is she now?" he said suddenly.

"Who?" I said.

"Don't try to play the fool with me, you know *who's* well as I do—Miss Martha of the Brick House, that's who! What's she doin' here?"

"Why, she's dead," I said.

He blinked at me. "I know she's dead—I'm not teched!" Tears spilled over like a child's and made bright rivers down his cheeks. "I'm askin' ye, what's she doin' *here*? She's got no business here—it ain't *right*—no, it ain't *right*!" He sniffed loudly, and rubbed a sleeve across his face.

We were surely alone, yet I was not in the least afraid, for he had an otherworldly look to him, gentle yet wary. He might have been a deer strayed into the village, except that panic seemed no part of his makeup, only grief, open and unashamed.

"Who are you?" I said, and smiled, to put him at ease.

"Who are *you*?" he countered slyly.

I don't know why I answered as I did. "I'm Emelie Carson," I said.

He stared at me for a moment, then shook his head. "No, you *ain't*," he said argumentatively. "Ye can't be, 'cause *she's* dead, Emelie is. Except she's buried proper, where she belongs. Ye'd *know* that, if you was really and truly Emelie Carson."

Now he was easing himself off, away from me, as if I were someone to be afraid of because I had not answered as I should, as if I had tried to trap him with untruths, and he wanted to escape. For a moment he was a deeper shadow moving among the heavy bushes, and then—nothing. I was alone.

I was so completely alone I thought suddenly there was no reason to remain, Gam wasn't here: there was no one here to thank, nothing here to say goodbye to. It was stupid to have come.

As soon as I reached my room I took out Gam's letter and stood for a moment looking at the envelope. Then, as a child postpones a longed-for treat, I laid it unopened on the bureau and I unpinned my hair and brushed it, decided not to put it back up, but drew it away from my face, fastening it with a clasp at the nape of my neck. Then I searched for a brighter lipstick. Gazing at myself

in the mirror, I decided I looked like a rusty-headed sparrow: neat, not gaudy, in bargain-basement plumage remarkable for its inconspicuous sobriety.

Twenty of seven: time for a last goodbye. I slit the envelope, drew out the sheet of paper, sat down in the rocker next to the lamp, and began to read:

My dearest Emelie: By now you will know that Tamarack is yours, with certain reservations, and you will know what those reservations are. Because I do not want you to be unduly angry with me should they chafe you, let me spell out why I made them.

Tamarack, from its very beginning, has seen too much hate; it needs to be sanctified by love. This you cannot do if you do not live there. I want Tamarack to belong to someone who loves it as one can love only one's own hearth. Hence all those stipulations about living there at all times of the year, for Tamarack is not to be anyone's fair-weather house—I will not have it so demeaned.

I know, thanks to your training, you are fully capable of overseeing all the necessary work of replacing roof slates, repointing chimneys, reglazing windows; when I have required you to assume such supervisory duties it is on the principle that one's heart invariably converges on the work of one's hands. I have left enough funds to cover your needs during the five years (not such a long time, after all) that you and Tamarack are on trial. During this time you are to indulge whatever program of planting and furbishing your taste and pleasure incline you to, and your purse permits.

You see, Emelie, it is my dearest wish that you should come to love Tamarack as I do, that you find happiness there, and peace, and a good life. One can ask for little more on this earth than to spend one's days at Tamarack, and to sleep there forever, as I do now, in the burial ground above the lake, where my beloved Luke and I used, so long ago, to play hide-and-seek among the stones. Visit me there on occasion, Emelie dear, but do not make it a chore or a duty—come only when you're feeling lonesome or have some news (good or bad) to bring me. Somehow I cannot believe that beyond that door I am about to pass

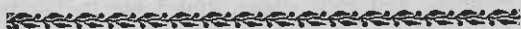
through lies nothingness. How can such affection as I have for Tamarack and for you cease to be? I do not believe it does. . . .

In cold horror, I reread those concluding lines. I had not mistaken their meaning: *Gam expected to be buried at Tamarack . . .* she had never dreamed otherwise. . . .

The phone rang. Mr. St. John for Mrs. Milne.

I folded Gam's letter and restored it to its envelope, put the envelope in my purse, and went out of the room like one sleepwalking.

Chapter Eleven



The lobby of the Welkin Inn has a number of chunky overstuffed chairs upholstered in deep green and scattered about like a boxwood planting. From the depths of one of these, Justin St. John rose and stood watching me make my way toward him, past voices swelling and fading as unnaturally as if the whole place were something I dreamed up, as if it didn't exist at all.

From a great distance I heard his greeting, courteous yet impersonal: "Good evening. I hope I haven't kept you waiting."

I couldn't think what to reply. I couldn't speak.

He raised his eyebrows. "Don't tell me you've been grievously disappointed after all? My condolences, Mrs. Milne."

I couldn't think what he could be talking about. I drew in a shuddering breath and said in a low voice, "We buried her in Welkin!" His face blurred and disappeared. "Oh, God!" I said.

I felt him take my arm. "I believe our table is ready."

I trotted obediently at his side across a vast carpeted space to a table against the windows. I stared at the blackness of the window—there was some clown's face

staring back at me, some white-faced girl's white face with lipstick much too red, and I took out a piece of tissue and wiped off the offending lipstick as unself-consciously as if I were alone. And then there was a squatty kind of glass in front of me clinking with ice in an amber fluid, and fire burned my throat, and I was all right.

I took another swallow. "I've had a shock," I said.

He was studying me as impersonally as if I were something he intended to draw—or to dissect. "Care to talk about it?"

I shook my head. "No, thank you," I said politely. "It—it doesn't concern you."

"As you like. Shall we order?"

I stared at the menu and I could see Gam's spidery handwriting: ". . . to sleep there forever . . . above the lake . . . where my beloved Luke—" "Please, I—I can't choose."

He ordered, and food came, and I ate it. He talked, and I answered, or I suppose I did. And all the time, all the time I could hear that ghost, or gremlin, or gravedigger—whatever he was—I could hear his "*What's she doin' here? It ain't right!*" He had known more about what Gam wanted than I had. Why *hadn't* she been buried where she wanted to be? She'd written out detailed instructions, Dixon Mansfield had said so. "We'll follow them, insofar as possible," he'd said. Why hadn't it been possible? Dear God, I hadn't even *read* her instructions! I had been so absorbed in my own grief I had not even thought to check . . . "*I love you, Gam,*" I'd said, and hadn't even bothered to read what she wanted done. . . .

I found I was picking over some kind of tiny fowl—Cornish hen, I supposed—and Mr. St. John seemed to be talking about his work . . . had been talking about his work for some time.

"I really don't know how long the whole study will take. Just when I think there can't be anything more in one area, I'll come across one, two—sometimes even more—new specimens. In July I found a *Sarracenia purpuria* in the bog above the lake, and last week I came across a *Sanguisorbia canadensis* in the same spot. It amazes me still, how swiftly the changes come!" What on earth was he talking about? Those pseudo-Latin words

sounded for all the world like botanical nomenclature—Gam used to rattle off phrases in the same cadence . . . “From now until snowfall there won’t be much new, of course,” he was continuing, “but I’ve several seed structures to finish, and later on I’d like to do a number of bare twig studies. Are you planning to move in before winter? Or could you possibly extend my lease?”

“Oh, I couldn’t do that,” I said. “I have to move in right after the first of November. I have to be there, you see. Gam wants me to be there.” He was regarding me strangely, and I added, “At Tamarack, I mean. You *were* referring to Tamarack, weren’t you?”

“Yes,” he said. His eyes had gone cold and opaque. “I was talking about Tamarack. I beg your pardon—I seem to have bored you into a coma.”

“You haven’t bored me,” I said, “because I haven’t been listening.” I lifted my water glass with both hands and took a sip; in spite of my efforts, it sloshed a little. “I shouldn’t have come,” I said. “I don’t seem capable of logical thought. You *did* say you wanted to ask about your lease, didn’t you?”

“I have just done so,” he said. “I have just this moment finished explaining—at considerable length, for which I would apologize if you had been listening—why I would like to stay at least through October. I prefaced this dissertation with a brief request that you honor my lease.”

My face grew hot. “Certainly you may stay!” I said. “You have a lease, therefore you may stay!”

“Perhaps you ought to consult your husband,” he said with cool impudence. “He may have other plans.”

“I—I have no husband,” I stammered. I began to twist my ring. “He’s dead,” I said.

“Is that so?” he said, and meeting his eyes, cold and faintly contemptuous, as if I were a liar whose lies were of no consequence, I knew that he knew—Gam must have told him—I was divorced.

“That’s right,” I said huskily. “We divorced, and then he died.” His eyes flicked down on my hand, on my ring, then back to my face. My hand burned; my face burned. I said, “I wear it for protection. It’s dangerous to be alone in Boston.”

“I didn’t think you wore it out of sentiment.”

I could feel the blood drain from my face. He’s known

about it all along, I thought. He knew I was divorced when he asked me about my children, there in Tamarack. "*Your own, then?*" he'd said, with that Judas smile of his. And: "*How many do you have?*" he'd said. To trap me . . . to trap me in some way . . .

The waitress was handing us menus. I stared at the card, and the print danced before my eyes. "*Visit me there on occasion, Emelie dear—*" I managed to gasp, "Nothing, thank you—" and he reached over and took the card from my fingers.

"Two coffees," I heard him say, "and two cognacs."

I studied the blackness of the windowpane. There was the white blur that was my face, and another blur that was St. John's turned toward me, two black holes where his eyes regarded me steadily. I wanted to shade my face with my hand. Not much longer now, I thought. In a few minutes we'd be done . . .

The coffee came, and the brandy. I took a sip of coffee, and then a sip of brandy, and I said quite calmly and clearly, "We buried her in Welkin, you see. She wanted to be buried at Tamarack."

When he made no answer to this, I took another sip of brandy. He was regarding me in a way that reminded me—my heart lurched—of Bard. His cannibal-artist look, I used to call it: as if he were devouring what he was looking at, and only the surface mattered, what lay beneath was none of his concern.

"I didn't *know!*" I said harshly.

St. John's eyes changed, then, and there was nothing of Bard in his face at all. "You mind, don't you? You mind very much."

I couldn't answer. I took another sip of brandy.

"How do you know that's what she wanted?"

"She says so—she wrote me a letter—I just read it . . ." And I opened my purse and took out Gam's letter and handed it across to him to read, and it never occurred to me not to, that it was something private between Gam and me.

He refolded it thoughtfully. "When did you get this?"

"This afternoon—he gave it to me—"

"Fenwick?"

I shook my head. "Dixon Mansfield. After the funeral."

"Awkward, but not your fault. You couldn't have known."

"Yes I could!" I said. "Don't you see? There was another letter—she wrote another one, about her funeral, just how she wanted it—and I never read it! I didn't even ask to see it! I just wanted to—to get through it as easily as I could—"

"Who had this other letter? Mansfield again?" I nodded. "He didn't offer to show it to you?" I shook my head. "Odd."

"No, it wasn't odd at all," I said. "I'm sure if I'd asked to see it he would have showed it to me. When I didn't ask, he—probably he didn't want to do anything that would remind me—"

"Remind you of what?"

"The other funerals."

"Whose? Your former husband's?"

"And my parents'. I'd just told Dixon Mansfield about them—I hadn't realized I should write him—well, I mean I didn't know whom I was supposed to write . . ." Dear God, what a dinner companion I am! "Now I'm boring you," I said, trying to smile.

"When was all this?"

"Last year. A year ago this April."

"I see," he said, his eyes never leaving my face. "Yes, perhaps it's only natural Mansfield kept his own counsel." He signaled for more coffee. "It's not my business, as you say, yet I knew your Gam, as you call her; I was fond of her in my own way. Why couldn't she be buried where she wanted to be? It's not so much to ask, is it? Damn it all, she gave you Tamarack—"

"In a way," I said. "Don't forget I have to earn it." I managed a smile. "Like in a fairy story, do this and do that and I'll give you half my kingdom. Only Gam is giving me practically all of hers, as you know."

"What do you mean, 'as I know'? I assumed she did, when you were gracious enough to honor my lease."

I felt a flush of anger. "Oh, come now, Mr. St. John, you were quick to want to bet with me that Tamarack was mine—a very safe wager, I must say, because you knew it was! After all, you'd seen the Will!"

"Seen the Will? How should I have seen it?"

"You witnessed it!" I said. "There's your name on it!"

"My dear Mrs. Milne," he said, "one does not *read* a Will one witnesses." I could feel the color creep into my face; I felt like a schoolgirl caught in a silly error. Of *course* not—they ask you to come in—"We were asked to come in," he said, "Mrs. What's-her-name the Matron—" he grinned—"plus a worthy woman who dusts the flowers, and myself. 'This is my Will,' said Martha, 'and I am signing it,' and she did so. Then each of us signed where Mansfield told us to, and I assure you, ma'am, I kept my eyes where they belonged."

My face was scarlet. "Then how *did* you know she left me Tamarack?"

"She consulted me." His evaluating eyes played over my face. "This summer, after she heard about your divorce."

"Dear God," I said, my voice shaking, "you had no—no right to pump her about me!"

"I didn't 'pump' her, as you call it," he said evenly. "She was lonely—hellishly lonely—and I was willing to listen. Sometimes that's all you can do for someone, just listen. She was damned upset about you," he went on mercilessly. "I know it's none of my business, so there's no need for you to flare up, but I couldn't help being sorry for her, and so I listened. Besides, as I say, I was fond of her by this time." He smiled. "It's a pleasure to meet a woman one can be fond of, and feel safe." He sipped his brandy. "She was so shaken by what she took to be your disloyalty—to stay with her husband only three months, that's not like my Emelie, she never was like that!" she kept saying—that I'm frankly amazed she left Tamarack to you after all. With or without strings attached."

"What amazes *me*, Mr. St. John," I said, "is that you should be amazed! Did you really expect Gam to take your advice? You forget Gam knew me, and you didn't—you still don't! Why should she listen to you, or—or swallow your opinion of me?"

"I never advised her not to leave Tamarack to you. I wouldn't presume to meddle in a stranger's fate. Maybe you'd made a bad choice, I said. I said young girls are easily deceived, and all that rot. I put forth the argument that the fact you divorced, and so soon, might be evidence you had *high* standards, not that you had none at all."

I could not remember when I had felt such humiliation.

"I confess I find it hard to be grateful to you for your diplomacy," I said through stiff lips.

"All you need be grateful to is Martha's generous and loving heart."

"I am that," I said in a low voice. "Whatever you may think of me, I am quite capable of feeling a decent gratitude. . . . It's so unfair, isn't it?" I went on when he didn't speak. "She should have been there—she should be there now—"

"We come back to that, don't we?" He laid bills on the check. "Are you going to see Mansfield for any reason soon? I really would like to know why Martha is still exiled."

"I'm to see him tomorrow at four. I'll ask him."

"Will you have dinner with me afterward and tell me what reason he gave?"

"Here?" I said, and flushed when he shook his head. How crass, to suggest dining twice in this surely terribly expensive—

"I was thinking, why not at Tamarack? I'm not a bad cook. Get that jabber-jay Kendall to bring you, and I'll drive you back. I'll look for you around six, or earlier, if you're through with Mansfield then." He drew out my chair, and I rose. "Speak of the devil," he added softly.

At the entrance to the dining room were Dixon Mansfield and Merrill Broome. She was wearing something long and narrow in ivory silk; a dragon in copper and gold climbed her skirt, emitting golden flame. Aware that every eye in the room was upon her (every male eye, at any rate), she gave us a radiantly welcoming smile. "Why, Justin!" she said, extending her hand as if she expected him to kiss it. "What a delightful surprise! It's been ages!"

"Good evening, Mansfield. Good evening, Merrill. It hasn't been ages at all—I saw you at the funeral. Black becomes you very well." He was ignoring her outstretched hand, an oversight—or a rudeness—she covered very skillfully by turning to me and putting her hand on my arm.

"You know, Emelie dear, I have the strangest feeling

we've met before—it nags at me and *nags* at me, but I can't think where!"

"In Boston—you were having some shelves put in a desk—"

"Of course—the clever salesgirl!" Her eyes flickered over my black frock. "How could I have forgotten?"

"Everybody does," I said. "I do it all the time."

She said warmly, "What a pity you two dined so early—we could have made it a party!"

"We're keeping you from your dinner," St. John said, and he guided me past the group of people waiting to be seated.

We crossed the lobby without speaking. At the elevator, I turned to thank him for dinner, when, "Bitch," he said under his breath. Then he looked less grim. "Not you, Mrs. Milne. As far as I know," he added with a touch of his old mockery. He smiled, but the smile did not reach his eyes. "No—don't thank me—I hate to dine alone. Until tomorrow, then."

When I reached my room I crossed to the window and opened it wide. The night air was cool and piercingly clean. I was very tired; it had been a long, long day and not an easy one. I turned on the light and drew out Gam's letter, and once again I read it over.

"How can such affection as I have for Tamarack and for you cease to be? I do not believe it does . . ."

No, Gam darling, it does not cease, I thought. I am surrounded by your love . . . I am strangely comforted.

Chapter Twelve



I spent most of the next day looking for work and a cheaper place to stay, and found neither. As I went up the walk to Dixon Mansfield's, I regretted I had been so quick to tell Justin St. John he could stay at Tamarack through October. It was ridiculous to be paying thirty

dollars a day for a place to sleep, when I owned—or nearly owned—a house with I didn't even know how many rooms! It was a train of thought to make me a trifle belligerent, so when Mr. Mansfield asked me if I had any questions before we began, I said yes I did—how much rent *was* Mr. St. John paying?

"I believe it's a hundred a month," he said.

"He has a bargain," I said with some bitterness.

"It seemed fair enough; Fenwick made sure he would use just the one room. The rest of the house is locked up tight."

"So it is," I said thoughtfully. Then, summoning up my courage, I added, "In the letter you gave me, Gam says—she implies—she wanted to be buried at Tamarack. Why wasn't this done?" In spite of all my efforts, my voice was unsteady.

"I think when I've gone over the—ah—the financial situation with you, you will understand. The graveyard at Tamarack lies on the far slope, about a third of a mile from the house. There's no road to it, that is to say, no decent road. The last Carson to be buried there was Antoinette in '68, and the road was so appalling it nearly wrecked the hearse—it ripped off the oil pan, among other damage—and Bennett's said that was the last time they'd go to Tamarack unless the road was fixed. Naturally Henry never did, so when he died and the estate was tied up—everything comes to a screeching halt, my dear, when a Will is contested, you can't even pay the bills—of course there wasn't money available. I couldn't see what else to do but buy a plot in the Welkin cemetery and bury Henry there." He commenced to fiddle with his pen. "I—ah—I lent the estate what was necessary. And as Martha was so old it seemed—ah—practical to buy a double plot."

I felt a chill of pure horror. "You mean Gam is buried next to Henry?" I said incredulously. "But she *hated* him!"

"My dear, it honestly doesn't matter to her, you know."

But it mattered to me—it mattered terribly to me! I said doggedly, "Gam left me some money—I should think I could have been expected to have the road patched up a bit. I should have been *asked*—"

"It would take more than patching, I'm afraid. My

dear, I—I find it very difficult to tell you this, but for some time now I—ah—I have been aware that Martha's wealth was just . . . eroding away. The—as I told you, the stock market—I did my best—” His hands were trembling slightly. “I didn't tell Martha. I—I hoped she'd last until the market recovered . . .”

My brief stab of pity yielded almost at once to a premonition of bitter disappointment. I might have known it was too good to be true, having Tamarack . . . thinking of living there . . . planning. There wouldn't be enough money. Of course not.

“ . . . So you see it is most unfortunate that Martha's Will provides for all those other bequests before she mentions yours. They must be paid first, and they must be paid now, which means we shall have to liquidate some if not all of her investments at this—ah—unpropitious time. And of course the acreage of Tamarack—the very wealth of Tamarack—is a drawback. Indeed, in a way it's a disaster. The house and land must be appraised at 'fair market value', which means that both the Federal and the State inheritance taxes, as well as the Town property tax, are based on today's sky-high prices.”

What it all came down to was that the money Gam thought she was leaving me had shrunk, and the taxes had climbed, and it was going to be very chancy whether the one would cover the other. And I had to pay the bills and see to the repairs, and if I couldn't, I couldn't have Tamarack. Gordon and Merrill would have Tamarack, and it didn't matter that that wasn't what Gam wanted, any more than she wanted to be buried in Welkin. . . .

“I'm sure you did as much as anyone could, Mr. Mansfield,” I said. “Now it's up to me. What I've got to do is make up my mind Tamarack is going to be mine, as Gam wanted it to be, and act accordingly. I'll move in, and I'll start looking after things—”

“Splendid! Splendid!” He was clearly relieved. Had he expected me to berate him? “Get as much attended to as you can before your furniture from the River House is transferred to Tamarack.”

That's so, I thought—there's that furniture. If I had to, perhaps I could sell a few pieces, in order to keep a dry roof over the rest . . . or a roof at all. “Those people who

are renting—they aren't using it, are they?" I said, worried.

"No, no, my dear, of course not! Gordon had all the valuable pieces moved into two or three rooms, and those rooms are securely locked. Your furniture is quite safe. But it will have to be appraised, as will the houses, too, of course. Then we will know exactly what the inheritance taxes amount to. However, my preliminary figures show there's little danger either the River House or Tamarack will have to be sold to meet them."

"Dear God, I should hope not!"

"Yes—well, I've gathered together this year's bills for your records. Everything that was due up to the date of Martha's death has been paid, including the fire insurance, for which St. John's rent has been providential. There are no utility bills, of course—Henry never even had a telephone put in." He smiled bleakly. "Frankly at the moment it's the property tax that worries me. Welkin's rate is right up there with the worst in the state—too many miles of roads, too few taxpayers." He shook his head glumly. "It's those nine hundred acres that can cause trouble. Last year Tamarack's taxes ran about thirty-two hundred; this year it's thirty-seven, and the Lord only knows what it'll be next year, after the reappraisal."

I said, my mouth dry, "It hasn't been paid this year?"

"It's not due until the last day of October. I'm afraid it has to come out of your inheritance, if we follow Martha's instructions to the letter, which, of course, we must."

Yes, to the very stroke and serif of each letter, I thought, or Merrill would see me in court . . .

"Well, then, to sum up, my dear: I'll have the appraisals done, the tax forms filled out, and sufficient securities sold to cover the debts and cash bequests. I'll send you a statement of what all this comes to, and what it leaves in the estate—that is, what your share will be. I don't know how soon I can get these figures to you—"

"Well before the thirty-first of October, I hope—I see there are whopping penalties if you don't pay your property tax on time! And now, Mr. Mansfield—" I could only hope I didn't sound positively gloating—"may I have the keys, please?"

"Yes, of course." And he handed me the two I had

used before, the heavy one to the north door, the more ornate one to the garden door. I stood there weighing them in my hand, the keys to my very own house, to my hearth and home: *where I had a right to enter as I pleased . . . where all the rooms were mine!*

"There must be more than these two, Mr. Mansfield," I said.

"Gordon will have them. Perhaps it won't be out of your way? His office is on the Green, opposite the Inn."

"I'll pick them up in the morning," I said. *Before I move in!* I thought, and my heart thudded with exultation.

When I engaged Ken Kendall to drive me out to Tamarack once more, I told him he need not wait or return after me, as I was dining with my tenant, who had very kindly said he'd see me back to Welkin. And then I couldn't help wondering if the phrase *my tenant* had impressed him. As far as I could tell, it had not, and I had to laugh at myself. Of course—what was a landmark in my life was no more than a half day's gossip in others'.

The children at Ransom's Bridge were playing in the road, and scattered at our approach. One of them, a scrawny little girl of four or five, ventured a wave in response to mine; I wondered if she knew we were to be neighbors. The way seemed shorter than before. Now and then I saw something familiar: a ravine with the carcass of a car half-buried in the underbrush; a dead tree whose trunk boasted five enormous irregular holes, the work of a demented woodpecker. We're nearly there, I thought; I'm nearly home! And I could have laughed aloud, as children do, for joy.

The birch tree was no longer blocking the way but had been cut into lengths and pulled aside. We bore steadily ahead, and there before us, rose and apricot and gold in the last rays of the sun, was Tamarack. "No sign of your friend—sure he'll be here?"

"I'm early," I said.

"I tell you what. You eat at the café, right? If you don't come in by nine aye emma, I'll know you're stuck out here and I'll come after you—okay?"

There it was again: that unexpected kindness, and from a stranger; how *safe* one is in the country, I was thinking as he backed and turned and drove off the way

we had come. I could hear his vehicle churning down the lane, and then silence. Somewhere a jay called, and from the other side of the house, from way the other side, came an odd primeval *plonk!* like a great bass fiddle struck once, and I thought, safe, yes, but we really are in the wilds here.

I went up the slope to the north door, and unlocked it, and walked boldly through the hall to the garden door, and unlocked that, and went out onto the terrace, leaving both doors wide open behind me. It's time, I thought, it's long since time for Tamarack to fling wide its doors in welcome to all who pass by!

The door to the kitchen wing was open, too, and a savory smell of cooking beckoned me. I stepped into the little hall. "Anybody home?" No answer. I swung wide the door and went on in.

There was a bowl of asters and goldenrod and the ro-seate leaves of sumac at one end of the trestle table, and a number of candles of various lengths stuck in bottles at the other. Whatever was cooking on the stove was bubbling softly to itself, and the smells that escaped whenever the lid gave a little hop were simply delicious. The room was as neat and orderly as it had been that other time, except that now the painting gear against the north window seemed to be in use: there were folders leaning against the wall, and a paper tacked to a board on the easel table, and some sort of a plant in a jar—a strange plant with a stalk of shiny red berries like lacquered beads—and on the paper, I saw as I drew near, was a drawing of the plant. Of the entire plant, with a dense raceme of small flowers like a bottle brush; of one floweret much enlarged; of the tripartite leaves; and, not yet completed, of the fruiting stalk, its absurd bunch of scarlet berries like a cockade. There was also a quick sketch of open woods, with an unused lane in the foreground and a great trunk fallen across. . . . In one corner was the legend *Actea rubra*—*Red Baneberry*...

As I stared at the drawing, at the apparent speed and sureness with which the lines had been inked in, at the subtle colors of the wash, at the placing of each component, so exactly right, I felt a tingling along the nape of my neck. Dear God! If this was done by Justin St. John, who *was* he?

There were three of the folders—large fiberboard affairs like those in which artists store their unmounted drawings. I carried one to the window, braced the lower edge against my waist, and began to turn over the contents. It was a botanical Audubon's achievement: sheet after sheet of drawings: studies of the leaf, the stalk, the blossom, the root, sometimes of tiny plants a few inches tall, sometimes of trees; and always the sketch of where it had been found, and the date, and a quick indication of the scale; and then the botanical name, in that same bold yet legible hand that I remembered so abruptly summoning me to visit Gam, only here it was formed with greater care, rather like a goldsmith's script, for there was a suggestion of conscious pleasure in each stroke or swirl of the pen. *Cyperus stigosus*. I turned a page. *Erythronium albidum*. *Smilacina stellata*. And then: *Larix laricina*—*Eastern Larch, Hackmatack, Tamarack*.

There was the soft virginal green of the new shoot in spring, with an enlargement of both the staminate and pistillate flowers; *Epinette Rouge* was inscribed by the latter. There were the cones in summer (closed) and in fall (open), and the winged seed. There were two sketches of the tree in its habitat: one with fall foliage, the other, the bare tree of winter. Both versions had an absurd air of optimism, with all the branches and little branchlets and twigs reaching for the sky, as if the tree were caught in an updraft, like when you stand over those subway ventilating shafts and a train whips through below you and the wind blows your skirts and hair. I gave a little laugh of pleasure, and was about to turn the page, when, "You like it?" said Justin St. John at my elbow, and I almost dropped the folder.

"Don't *do* that!" I gasped. "Dear God, you startled me!"

"Your hair is that same color," he said, "exactly."

"I know," I said. "I can't help it."

"I'll show you the rest when the light's better." He closed the folder. "I should think you'd regard it as a good omen—not everybody goes around looking like the personification of the place where they're to live."

"How long have you been doing these? They're marvelous—"

"Don't start that," he said abruptly. "I hoped you

wouldn't. 'They're *mahvelous* . . .' 'Ooooh, they're *wonderful*—I wish I could paint like that!' " He made a face. 'They aren't marvelous, and I'm not a painter. I'm a copyist. Painters create—they filter it through their psyches. I don't. What I see, I put on paper. I took a batch of these in to that gallery in Welkin—it hangs over the river, do you know it at all?—it's well thought of, I'm told. I was hoping they'd schedule me a show, which if it made enough of a splash perhaps might catch a publisher's eye. Some of these species are close to extinction, thanks to Man and his damned greedy guzzling of the entire planet, so I thought a folio of the most endangered might have some historical interest.' He made a face. 'She started that. 'Oooh, *mahvelous!* ' *Merde*—'

"I speak French," I said.

"Do you now?" He grinned.

"She's very nice," I said firmly. "I like Mrs. Whittaker very much. She's kind and generous, so don't make fun of her."

He laughed. "And you're a scrappy, loyal friend. That doesn't alter the fact that gush is sickening."

"Well, so what did you do? Did you have a show?"

"I did not. When I said that none of them were for sale, she said it was *too* tiresome—" I could clearly hear Mrs. Whittaker's attractive accent in his mimicry—"but the Gallery lives on commissions, et cetera." He strolled over to the stove, lifted the lid, and gave the contents of the pot a stir. "Sorry I wasn't here when you came. I'd gone after our dessert." He gestured toward a bowl of blackberries on the table. "Try one."

It was large, lustrous, warmly sweet, and of such flavor as I had not imagined.

"This is the very paradigm of a blackberry, isn't it?" he said. "They're all over that slope the lumbermen laid waste. I'll show you when we drive back tonight."

"I didn't see any cut-over places."

"Off the east road. I always come that way—it may be steeper but you'll find it's much shorter."

His voice, his manner, all were different from that first time. He was still giving advice, I saw, but it was no longer underlaid with antagonism. Perhaps he had accepted that Tamarack was mine, and no longer resented it, or thought me unworthy.

We ate venison stew, and bread with a crisp crust, and drank a whole bottle of red wine. He talked about his work and tonight I listened. . . . How he wanted to 'save' every sort and kind of flora—grass and flower, shrub and tree—that grew here at Tamarack. "Of which there are hundreds," he said with a rueful smile. "I had no idea the area would be so rich or so diverse when I began. But Tamarack is fairly isolated, you know, and except for one or two places near the house, its soil seems never to have been turned over by the plow. What was here, is here. It seemed logical to expand my scope from endangered-now to possibly-endangered-in-the-future, a category without end, I fear."

"That could take years," I said. "A lifetime, perhaps."

"I know. But you have mercifully granted me until November." He looked a question at me; when I ignored it, he began to talk about the wild creatures that lived at Tamarack: the woodchuck by the vegetable patch, porcupine in the old orchard, red squirrels in the tamaracks, and the deer whose trails led to the lake. It all sounded so remote and so peaceful I had a feeling of unreality as I listened. And the candlelight flickered, and behind me the stove was warm; the darkness beyond the windows did not dare enter where we sat. . . . And all the while I was wondering how I could bring myself to say I was sorry, I couldn't wait until the end of October, I had to move in now.

When we had eaten the blackberries, slowly, enjoying each one, he set two chairs to face the stove. "Prop your feet on the rail like a real Yankee. If I set this keg between us you can put your coffee cup there, and your brandy—" he grinned—"for I intend to interrogate you again, Mrs. Milne, and my efforts will be wasted if you are locked inside your inhibitions, reminding yourself with every other breath you ought not to tell things like that to a stranger."

He questioned me about my work at Dillman's, and seemed amused by my replies; I thought our conversation unconventional only in that the man is supposed to talk about his work, and the woman (wide-eyed with real or pretended interest) is supposed to feed him questions, and our roles were reversed. Perhaps he thinks it's only fair

to give me equal time, I thought, and the brandy curled inside me, and my toes grew warm.

Then, smoothly, apparently without shifting gears, he was saying: "Why wasn't your grandaunt buried here at Tamarack, where she wanted to be? Did Mansfield say?"

"The undertaker wouldn't come here unless the road to the graveyard was repaired, and Henry—Gam's half-brother, you know—was a skinflint and wouldn't fix the road, so he's buried in Welkin, which serves him right, but the awful thing is, Gam's buried next to him, and it seems indecent to me, considering how he treated her—I'm not putting this very clearly—"

"I'm still with you," he said. "Martha told me all about her loving brother Henry, and how he booted her out, and your grandfather with her. She told me many a yarn about your forebears, Emelie Carson Milne, the sum total of which made me grateful I know so little about mine." He was regarding me soberly, in spite of the seeming flippancy of his words. "It distresses you to think of her there in Welkin, doesn't it?"

"Terribly," I said in a low voice. "I—I don't see how I can ever feel right about being here in Tamarack, when Gam is miles away, and her hated half-brother there next to her."

He was frowning. "Look—I know that lane to the burial ground very well. I should think one day with a bulldozer could have made it passable, plus a bit of gravel where it's wet—good God, the whole thing could be done for six or seven hundred dollars, easily. It seems to me if that's what your Aunt Martha wanted, Mansfield should have seen to it that it *was* done."

"No, he said he really couldn't," I said reluctantly. "If he spent the money on the road, there wouldn't be enough for something more imperative, like taxes. It all has to do with the way land values have climbed, and taxes being based on what things can be sold for nowadays, and the fact that Aunt Martha's securities aren't worth what she thought they were. I'll be lucky, I guess, once the taxes are paid, if there's anything left to fix the roof!"

"So you are rich and broke," he said.

I swirled the brandy in my glass. "Yes," I said. "But it's nicer than being broke and broke, which I usually am."

"Well, it's been a tricky market," he said noncommittally. He stood up, and I thought with a touch of panic he was about to suggest we set out for Welkin, and here I hadn't yet found the courage to say what I'd come to say . . . But he merely added a few chunks of wood to the stove.

"Mr. St. John," I was beginning when he interrupted me.

"I know you are my landlady and I your tenant," he said with a smile, "but the relationship would be less obnoxious if you called me Justin and I called you—if you will permit—Emelie."

"I—perhaps you'd better not," I said. "You may not like what I—what I have to say." I drew a deep breath. "I'd like to move in at once. T-tomorrow, in fact."

If I'd blown out the candles and thrown water in the stove the atmosphere couldn't have changed more quickly.

"So you want me to move out," he said. Gone was any hint that he was the gracious host and I the fêted guest. "Very well. Far be it from me to oppose your whims, Mrs. Milne. I shall be gone as soon as my rent for October has been returned—for some reason Fenwick did not trust me, and obliged me to pay in advance. I return the compliment."

"No—you don't understand! I *need* your hundred dollars! I mean, it's already gone to pay the fire insurance and I can't possibly repay it! I really haven't *any* money—it's costing me the earth to stay at the Welkin Inn and in less than a week at this rate I'll be flat stony broke even if I stop eating entirely! So if you c-could just let me move in—I wouldn't bother you, honestly I wouldn't! This is a big house and there's lots of room—you'd never have to see me! My husband was an artist and I know how important it is to be left alone! I'll never come in here—this is *yours*, I know it is—you won't even know I'm here, I mean there—we'll keep the doors locked between the main house and this wing, just as they are now, and you won't be interfered with in any way!" He was regarding me with a strange expression, and because I wanted to answer any objections he might have before he gave voice to them, I added hurriedly, "And it will be *quite* proper—I mean, no one will have any reason to talk, because it is most usual for a—a landlady to rent

out rooms, and it's not as if I—I've never been married—"

"My dear Mrs. Milne," he said coldly, "callous as it may seem, I couldn't care less if you get yourself talked about."

"I didn't mean *me*," I said breathlessly. "I thought you might be afraid my presence here would get *you* gossiped about!"

After a moment he said in a strangled voice, "Good God, I hadn't thought of that! What might people say, do you think?"

"Go ahead, laugh!" I said. "I daresay I'm being ridiculous—but the fact of the matter is, I'm d-desperate—I haven't any place else to go, and this is m-my house, and—and *nobody* is going to take it away from me! Not Gordon, or Merrill, or—or *you*, Justin St. John!"

"Certainly not I," he said. "As for Gordon and Merrill—are they proposing to join us?"

"Of course not! Tamarack is theirs if I don't manage to live here, that's all. It's in the Will. But don't worry—I'm *certainly* going to live here!"

He stared at me for a long moment. The candles were pinpoints of flame in his eyes; I couldn't read his expression. Then: "Yes," he said quietly, "I think you will. I'll wager you anything you like that you will. So move in, then, Emelie Carson Milne. It's your house—you don't have to ask my permission." He made an abrupt, angry gesture with one hand, and I knew he didn't want me here, that was plain. "But don't give me any of that guff about not being a bother," he went on coldly. "There's no way to cook over in the main house, and for all I know none of the bathrooms work. There are no lights. Do you know anything about oil lamps? How to fill them? Trim the wick? There's no heat, either. It's warm in this room right now because I have the stove going, but wait until the fire goes out. We have frost every night. Thirty-two isn't very cold outdoors, but it's damned cold inside, and fireplaces are just about the most inefficient way on earth to heat a room. They gulp firewood, you know. Somehow I can't see you cutting it, or lugging it in. Or hauling out the ashes—"

"Spare me your—your *dirge*!" I said. "Whatever makes you think I'm some kind of helpless nitwit? *Certainly* I

know how to fill an oil lamp! And if the bathrooms don't work, I'll call the plumber and have them fixed!"

"May I continue? It would be less bother for me if you move in here where it's easy to keep warm, and I use the main house—"

"Don't be silly! You won't be able to paint over there—you can't paint in a room at thirty-two degrees! I know *that* much!"

He showed his teeth. "I wasn't proposing to move my paints out. I intend to leave them right where they are, if you have no objection. I don't require a reverent silence—just don't anybody joggle my elbow. All I'll need from here is the cot—no, you'll be needing that. I'll take my sleeping bag—"

"Thanks!" I snapped. "I don't want to sleep in your bed!"

We had been circling each other like two cats spitting, but at this he gave a shout of laughter. "And who's asking you to?"

I tried hard not to, but I had to laugh. I felt like such a fool, and oddly shaken, too. I hate quarrels . . . But of course we hadn't been quarreling, exactly. I must be very tired, I thought; for some reason I felt almost like crying.

"Look," he said, "Emelie—all right, Mrs. Milne—I do realize it can't be pleasant for you to be obliged to share your house with a stranger, the first time you get to live here. If we both make a minimum of effort, we can work it out very well. We'll use this room as a day room, and I'll sleep on the other side of a number of locked doors, so there'll be no question of who is in whose bed." He said this very soberly, with no hint of laughter in his eyes; nevertheless I could feel my face growing hot. "We can split the grocery bill, or, if you like, I'll buy the groceries and you can lend a hand with the cooking and washing up, agreed? And long before the month is over, probably old Mansfield will have everything figured out to the penny, and you'll find you're very comfortably off after all. Come along, I'll take you back to Welkin. You have to pay for tonight anyhow, you might as well enjoy your last hot shower for God knows how long."

He snuffed out the candles. For a moment the room was in darkness except for the fire glowing through the

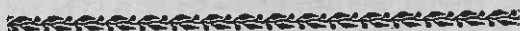
chinks in the stove; then he snapped on his flashlight, and the beam stabbed toward the Bible door.

"This way," he said, and took a key from a hook by the door.

"I have to lock up the main house," I said, and he gave me the flashlight, remarking that he'd wait for me by the lane.

And so it was that I walked alone through Tamarack, for the first time closing it securely against the night. As the doors shut and the locks clicked fast, I fought down a strange surge of emotion I would under other circumstances have called homesickness. This was the last night I would be sleeping away from Tamarack for five years, I promised myself. Or forever, if I worked it right.

Chapter Thirteen



September 10th, 1820

To my astonishment, Mr. Carson is eager to have his portrait painted. I am astonished, because I had not detected in him the least sign of vanity, nor, indeed, of close attention to his appearance. I do not mean he is slovenly: quite the contrary. But he is indifferent. He is clean-shaven only because it takes less time, he claims, than grooming and trimming a beard; his coat and britches are chosen less for their cut or colour than for those qualities he looks for in those who serve him: they must be durable, useful, adaptable, and undemanding. So when he donned the coat in which he was wed, and informed Mrs. Ransom she was to tell any labourer who came seeking his instructions to return at a later hour, and to me gave orders that I was to keep the child from furnishing an interruption which would only be an impediment to the speedy completion of Mr. Rhys' task, at first I was, as I have said, astonished; then I was pleased. I could foresee that this turn of events might have the

most delightful (albeit temporary) effect on our daily lives.

And so it has proved. He disappears into the north parlour with the limner, and there he stays for two whole hours at a time—blessed respite! Which leaves Constance and me in possession of the entire south side of the house and of the terrace. We can exchange secrets and laugh together and even sing, softly very softly, “like two sleepy wrens,” I whisper. We can creep up to my sitting room, she to struggle with her needle—Mr. Carson demands a sampler every year as evidence of her increasing skill—whilst I attend to my dear Journal.

Welcome, *welcome* to Parsloe Rhys, vagabond, wanderer, limner! And warmest, deepest, most *fervent* thanks to whatever wind did blow him hither!

September 11th

I am surprised to learn that one must have a north light for painting, and not, as I would have supposed, the lovely warm south light, sunshine drenching all and casting its illusion of gaiety and life. I said as much at dinner that first evening, and Mr. Rhys—for he is to be my husband’s guest until the portrait is finished; a pallet has been set up for him in a corner of the north parlour—Mr. Rhys remarked one cannot see detail in sunlight; for this one needs either shadow or the cooler, less impassioned light that streams in from the north.

“True,” said my husband. “As no doubt a man does not see clearly the face of his intended bride.” He took a deep draught of his cider punch. “But later . . . later every lineament becomes engraved on his mind.”

The remark was made without any evidence of rancour, or regret, or indeed of any identifiable emotion, yet I knew he was not referring to me, nor to Constance’s mother. What Mr. Rhys made of this comment I could not imagine; he said nothing at all, but poked at his venison stew with his knife, as if something therein aroused his curiosity.

I think he must find our household somewhat strange, for when I serve the meal, he seemingly by chance never looks at me; I feel I am performing some immodesty, which he, by the laws of hospitality, is obliged to avoid observing. I find this strangely comforting. I had thought

my *rebellious* spirit, which I have been at pains to subdue, must be in error; these services I perform like a serving maid must be right and seemly for *Mr. Carson's wife*, I told myself. The fact that in my father's house neither my aunt nor I had ever done such chores whilst my father remained sprawled at his ease was no true guide to Life in the World. My father, even during the height of the blockade, always had a serving maid. (And always, now I think back on it, young and pretty.)

So it cannot be economy that prompts my husband into thus making use of me, for Mrs. Ransom never lacks a country girl or two to help her with her sausage-making, or her beatings and boilings of laundry, or her scourings and scrubblings of wood floor and slate. But enough: why do I belabour my pen over this? Except that it does seem to me that the realities of marriage ought to dictate a change in the wording of the vows: "I, Emelie, do promise to *serve, submit, and obey* . . ."

If Mr. Carson ever glimpsed these pages, he would think me possessed of the Devil! Sometimes I am so astonished at my thoughts I cannot but wonder if that be not the case. I do seem so often feverish in spirit! Or perhaps the state of marriage itself somehow raises the temperature of the female blood.

September 12th

Last winter I taught Constance her letters—she *demand*ed that I do so. "You are writing and writing, and I do not know how!" she wailed. "If you go away and write to me, I won't know what you say!" "I'm not going away, you silly wren," I said, "but I will teach you all I know, as fast as you can learn it."

And so I asked Mr. Carson to obtain a reader for us, and he did so, and Constance bent her fair head over:

Happy the child whose tender years
Receive instructions well;
Who hates the sinner's path, and fears
The road that leads to Hell.

And this past Spring and Summer I commenced to teach her her numbers, for I would not have her *deprived*, because it is her ill fortune not to have so loving a father as mine. "You cannot help being female, Emelie," my fa-

ther said to me, "but that is no reason you should have no learning. Besides—" this with a twinkle—"beauty fades, my dear, but brains persevere, provided they are not malnourished!"

I said as much to Constance. "You may be female, Constance, my child," said I, using the term of address that now seems natural to me, "but I shall feed your mind insofar as I am able!" I did not tell her how very nearly totally ignorant I am, for I was lazy, and never learned Latin or Greek, or Geometry, nor Astronomy beyond the names of the brightest stars. But there is much I have to teach her, nonetheless!

I was reflecting on this today when I awoke and saw the frost like a veil of death across the grass. Life passes, thought I (hardly an original notion). Some might think it too soon by ten years for the lessons I would teach, but I do not think them so premature. Why should a child be taught her letters, and how to curtsy, and proper deportment when friends of one's parents come to call (knowledge seldom if ever needed in this house!) and not be thought ready to learn the *essentials* which do underlie all of life? Which I was never taught, but had to learn for myself. Which are these:

That love without marriage is sin. (Of course this I was taught.) It is the death of the soul; it damns us to Hell-fire. Yes, yes, yes—this we know. *But marriage without love is also sin.* I would tell her this, though no one told me. It, also, is death, I would say; it is death of the spirit. Love first, then marriage, my darling, I shall say—explaining that of course I do not refer to physical love; I mean the mutual recognition that each is but a half of a matched whole . . . wait, wait until such love is your portion, Constance my child, I shall say. If it is denied you (as I daresay it was my aunt) then do not marry, as she did not. I used to pity her; now I envy her. She was *herself*: Lavinia: spinster. The term does not strike my ear with quite the same note of opprobrium as once it did. Had she not spun her *own* fate? and had not been caught up in—tangled in—*strangled* in—someone else's?

Why I have such fears for Constance I do not know, unless it be that I, with so loving a father, am yet so unhappy. I must arm her with knowledge, which is a woman's only true protection. I shall seek the right moment,

here in this room when the candle is lit, and by its modest light I brush the child's hair—it is so fair it is the colour of my ivory comb—“Love first, then marriage, dear child,” I will tell her. “Then you need never learn, as I have learnt, that happiness is no more than a trick of the light, sunlight on the windowsill of childhood, turn your head and it is gone, gone in a heartbeat . . .”

September 13th

Mr. Teagle the Silent came with the mail yesterday, bringing Mr. Carson the weekly *Horizon*, and for me a letter from my father. He is well, but lonely, he says. Other men's daughters do be content to stay at home, and conduct the household affairs of their widowed fathers. Why could not I? Why must I have been in such a hurry to marry? Had he known his sister was not long for this world . . . And so on, and so on, for fully two pages.

Does my father forget he urged me to this marriage? He may think he did not, but he did. He and my aunt, too, thought it most suitable. Was he not happy to have his affairs set in order by my bridegroom? Did not my father himself expect to be married, now that his fortunes would be so much improved?

So I was thinking, when Mr. Carson said impatiently, “Take your place at table, Emelie. I am waiting to hear your father's news.”

I did as I was bid. “He is well, thank you,” I said, “but he regrets my marriage.”

“Regrets?” said Mr. Carson coldly. “What now? Has he acquired more debts, and wishes for a still more generous son-in-law?”

I flushed. “Indeed he is grateful for your help,” I said in a low voice, aware that the limner was sitting motionless, his hands poised over his bread, unmoving. As if he cannot eat, I thought, when at the same table. . . . “It is through no fault of his own that he suffered such financial reverses,” I said. “The blockade brought near ruin to many.”

“I daresay there was no real chance to circumvent it, there in Boston,” my husband said, as if excusing my father for faintheartedness. “Here in Vermont trade was brisk heading north.” This with complacency. Mr. Rhys

said nothing, but commenced once again to eat, slowly, as if the food had lost its flavour.

I said, "Mr. Carson, correct my ignorance, I beg, but did not this law forbid trading with our enemy? I thought—I was very young, to be sure, but still—I thought we were *at war*."

"You are correct, madam," Mr. Carson said coolly. "We were at war with England. However, we here in these parts viewed Canada in a somewhat different light. You must remember it was not so many years since the Government in Washington dillydallied and shillyshallied over our aspirations to become the fourteenth State—I believe our antislavery sentiments weighed heavily in our disfavour—and we hadn't forgotten that. Indeed, we had at one time been considering union with Canada. Furthermore, though it is hard to believe now, with the turnpikes, in those days the roads were little better than runnels of mud, and it took weeks to ship anything overland. The only crop we had that was easy of transport and would neither rot nor threaten to drop dead on the way was pearlash." He downed half a mug of cider. "For the first ten years after I settled here, no one saw any actual cash except for what we made cutting timber and converting it into potash—everything else was barter." He was speaking directly to Mr. Rhys, having dismissed me, I supposed, as incapable of following his argument. "We considered the war a quarrel between Portsmouth, Boston, Washington, and London—it had little to do with us."

Apparently Mr. Rhys felt that good manners demanded he contribute some comment. Reluctantly, he said, "And the Government—it made no attempt to stop you?"

Mr. Carson shrugged. "They had not many men to spare, and the border is mostly wilderness. To be sure, the usual way was to use the lake—it was easier in that all we had to do was to get our produce to its shore; but intervention was more likely, and now and then there was bloodshed. However—" and he smiled sardonically—"I have no pangs of conscience over selling cattle and whisky to Canada. I was but obeying Divine injunction: 'If thine enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him drink.'"

Should he ever pay us a visit, what if I were to tell my father that this spacious and elegant house was built

by monies made by ignoring the very blockade which brought his own financial downfall? "See the parlours, Father dear," I might say, "one for sunshine, one for shade, one to dine in, one for trade—why, there is a text for Constance's next sampler! And above this stately stairway, see the many bedchambers—enough for a most numerous family! Now come—do come with us into the charming town of Welkin! See the gracious houses, all built with the profits from providing cattle for the British army! From selling to our enemy wheat, or lumber, or whatever else the loyal citizens of Vermont could spare! No doubt they justified the sale of whisky on the grounds that if they got the troops drunk enough, they'd be easier to whip!"

My poor father! No, I could not say any of it. He would be disgraced in his own eyes should he know that the money which had come to him because of my marriage had been earned in so shameful a way. Or perhaps he *had* known—Mr. Carson appears to be a blunt, plain-spoken man who disdains to hide the source of his wealth. Still, I would say nothing to my father, because in that case he would know that I knew . . . that I suspected he had known, and had chosen to disregard what it must have told him about Mr. Carson: that my husband is a man who lets neither sentiment nor scruple stand in his way.

September 15th

Yesterday Constance was too frolicsome for lessons, and the day being like midsummer (at least the hours before noon, which happily coincided with the hours Mr. Carson was occupied with his portrait), we fished in the lake, and caught four handsome trout, not large, no longer than fifteen inches; but we were most proud, for this is a fish of great spirit, and must be *fought*, with fortitude as well as skill. We returned to the house in triumph swinging the fish on a stick between us, but much bedraggled in skirts and our hair sadly dishevelled. As ill luck would have it, we reached the steps to the terrace just as Mr. Carson strolled out to enjoy a pipe before dinner, and there we were, impaled on his glare.

"Get out of my sight!" This to Constance. "Ye're not fit to be seen!"

"Take the fish to Mrs. Ransom, Constance," I said as

calmly as I could; my pulse was racing and I had that familiar *echoing* sensation within me. "Then go and make yourself clean for dinner." Then I turned to meet the *inflamed* gaze of my husband. "The fault is entirely mine," I said. "Do not, I beg you, blame the child—it was I who suggested we should f-fashion a line—"

"As for you, madam," he cut in, anger and disgust in the curl of his nostril, "ye look like a slattern. Why think you I hire wash women and scullery maids? So that my wife can outdo them in slovenliness? Pray do not defend the child, although I agree you are much to blame for misleading her. Yet we are each of us responsible for our own misdeeds, Emelie—she, not you, must answer for the state of her dress; she must be punished for her misbehaviour, and you for yours. You are both to spare me your presence at table until tomorrow; this will give me time to consider what is to be done, for *something* must, Emelie—I am fast losing patience with you. Now, you, too, get from my sight!"

As I fled along the hall to the stairs I was aware of the limner stepping back into the north parlour and silently closing the door. I did not realize until I had shut the door to our chamber that the sound I heard was my own sobs; they soon ceased, my tears being neither fright nor grief, but rage. I stripped off my muddied frock and dressed myself in my flowered muslin, did up my hair, and tiptoed along the passage to the child's small bedchamber. Constance was huddled in her nightdress, the quilt to her chin. I held her to me, and stroked her hair.

"She—she will cook them for supper," Constance choked, "and we—we will not have a taste!"

"Never mind," I whispered in her ear, "we will remember how lovely they were in the water, all copper and silver flashing—we will be thankful we don't have to see them dead on a plate—"

"But I—I *like* trout!" She gave a little hiccup of distress. "And I'm *hungry*—"

"Perhaps Mrs. Ransom will bring you something," I said, and stroked her hair from her forehead, which was flushed and hot.

"No, she never disobeys him," Constance said sadly. "She is so big and noisy, but she's afraid of him too, I think."

Too . . . So the child saw I was afraid, as she was. What was I afraid of? Did I think he would thrash me, as if I were a lazy apprentice? Put me aside? Send me back to my father? Oh, *God*—that I should be so fortunate! No, it must be his heartlessness that I feared. It was unnatural for a man to speak so coldly to his wife. As if he wished she were someone else . . . and since she was not someone else—could not be—he detested himself, perhaps, for having her there, where someone else should be. So he spoke to her coldly, and looked at her coldly . . . when he did not look at her with that strange glow deep in his eyes. Like ashes on the hearth stirring when the wind comes down the chimney . . .

But should I let the child suffer, because *I* was where I was, where I could not help being: in another woman's house, another woman's bed, with another woman's husband taking me for wife . . . a dead woman's husband with a dead heart? Was it the child's fault? No, in no way. Was it not my duty to protect her? Yes, by the grace of God, indeed it was!

"I will go back to my own room and think," I said in a low voice. "Don't fret, dear child. I will think what to do."

I crept back to our bedchamber, and went to sit on the windowseat, the sash open, the soft breeze stirring the hangings, and stared down where the sunlight dappled the waters of the little lake. I could hear the chink of silver and glassware, and the voice of my husband droning in the room below: ". . . ten dollars a month, but that is with lodging and board . . . a shilling a gallon for the best whisky, but we put up our own cider . . . twenty barrels are sufficient . . ."

It occurred to me I had not heard Mr. Rhys contribute anything to the conversation. I wondered what manner of man he judged my husband to be. I wondered if the limner, too, was afraid of him. No, I thought, why should he be? He can always sling his pack over his shoulder and be off. . . . And for the first time I wondered what the portrait he was painting looked like—what sort of likeness could it be, so that Mr. Carson still would be pleased with the result, and would pay whatever had been agreed upon?

At last they rose, and I heard my husband go out, as

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At last they rose, and I heard my husband go out, as

was his custom, to take his horse and make his daily round of fields and mill; and Mr. Rhys went back into the north parlour to do whatever he did in the afternoon. Perhaps he read. Perhaps he prayed. Perhaps he mixed his pigments, cleaned his brushes, or struggled to improve various details in the painting: the line of buttons on my husband's coat . . . the folds of his cravat . . . his hands . . . I had heard that hands were difficult . . .

At the thought of my husband's hands my anger returned. With fork and knife those hands had been lifting our catch to his mouth. Then there were those other activities of my husband's hands . . . My anger was swallowed by desperation. I *had* to think . . . I had to *think!* I had promised Constance . . . but by day's end I had not thought of any solution to our mutual dilemma.

When it became apparent that Mr. Carson was commencing his supper without us, that we were indeed being denied a second meal (and all for the 'sin' of having muddied our skirts!) once again anger armed me against fear or despair. I slipped down the hall to Constance's room, where, finger on lips, I instructed her to dress, and when she had done so, I took her by the hand and led her to the back stairs, that narrow flight that goes down from my sitting room hallway to the pantry. I indicated that she was to follow directly behind me, and I tested each step before I rested my weight on it. We made it down the narrow flight without any betraying sound.

The door to the dining room was open, but only by a few inches. We tiptoed silent as smoke across the entryway to the kitchen door, which we eased closed behind us. Mrs. Ransom was ladling up cabbage chowder by the fire. At the trestle table Mr. Ransom and two of the shepherds were wolfing down chunks of mutton and hasty pudding. As Constance and I entered, a silence fell on the whole company; they stared at us as if we were ghosts.

I led the child over to the table. "We sup with you tonight," I said in a low voice, "for we are bid to *spare him our presence* until the morrow."

The men grinned; one of them slowly licked a finger. Mrs. R looked frightened. She did not move to serve us.

"Feed the child," I said in the same low voice, that could not be heard, I swear, ten feet away. "I will not have her hungry."

Slowly she spooned a plate of chowder and set it before Constance, and then, with even more reluctance, she set a plate before me. In case of trouble, I thought as I lifted my spoon, the men might possibly be of help, but she would not, for she, I could see, dreads hunger herself.

We were not discovered, and so, demure as church-mice, this morning Constance and I came down to breakfast, broke our bread into ladylike pieces, and munched and sipped quietly. I gazed at my plate as if overcome with contrition. Let him think me meek as dishwater, I thought. I did not dare to look at him, for fear he would look right through my eyes into my mind, which was filled with burning anger! scorn! detestation!

To deprive a child of food for a fault that was none of her own! Even if it *had* been—even if she had muddled her skirts deliberately—of what consequence is a child's soiled frock? And if he would punish such a trivial thoughtless mistake with such severity, supposing the child *were* to be naughty—what my father or my aunt would call naughty: supposing she were to take something that was not hers; supposing she were saucy, or rude, or disrespectful of her elders—what would he do then? Lash at her with his whip as he had his horses?

I ate, and looked at no one.

September 16th

This morning Constance and I were sitting on the terrace, slicing apples to dry on those trays of woven grass Mrs. R. has hanging in front of her fire, and we were counting as we sliced, "*Five* hundred and twenty-one, *five* hundred and twenty-two," and so on, when Mr. Carson stepped into the hall and shouted: "Constance!"

She looked up at me, fright greying her face. "He is angry," she whispered, and her hands shook as she set aside her apple and put down her knife.

"Do not be frightened," I said in a low voice, but firmly. "I will go with you." I took her hand, and we went down the hall to the door of the north parlour.

"Well, come in, come in!" said Mr. Carson. "Don't loiter!"

My hands on her shoulders, I propelled the child into the room. I could feel her trembling.

"Come here!" said Mr. Carson, pointing to a spot on

the carpet directly before him. Constance crept forward. "Well?" He took the child's head and tipped it this way and that. "What think you?"

Propped against the wall above the desk was Mr. Carson's portrait. Constance stared from it to her father, sheer terror in her eyes. I could see she thought that by some hideous magic, now there were two stern faces where before there had been only one.

Mr. Rhys smiled down at her. "I shall be delighted to paint your daughter, sir," said he, "but would it not be better if she first accustoms herself to the idea? Perhaps if I were to paint Mistress Carson, and your daughter were to watch, she will see there is nothing to fear—though I put your wife's face on my board, still she will have all of it: not a pinch or smidgeon will be missing!"

Mr. Carson stared at me, as if the idea of having my portrait painted had never occurred to him. "Very well," he said abruptly, "but not in that frock, Emelie. Go don that green gown in which you were married. I should like to be able to remember you as you were that day."

And so I found myself wearing my velvet, my hair confined in plaits wound round my head; once again a bride, I thought, and looked modestly down at my hands clasped in my lap. It was hard to know where to look, sitting there with the cold light flooding over me like Judgment, Mr. Carson's portrait staring from the wall, and Constance seated on her stool where she could watch us both—me sitting there, and Mr. Rhys standing by that three-legged framework made of saplings, another board propped on it—Mr. Rhys staring at me, and staring at the board, a good large board, for my husband said he wanted this painting to be of a size to set in the panel over the mantel in my sitting room.

"A most suitable spot for such a painting," Mr. Carson remarked as we were having tea this afternoon. "There you will be, as you were then," he said, gazing at me as if I was already much changed (as indeed I am! I am!). "I should like to remember you as you were that day," he repeated.

I would not, I thought.

It is too painful to reflect on the irreparable change I was about to inflict on myself, out of wilfulness, impetuosity, unfounded optimism, and blind hope.

September 18th

It is no longer so easy to find a safe time to write in my Journal, for Mr. Carson, freed from the exigencies of posing, now once again prowls about, appearing in my sitting room on whim, stalking forth and returning unpredictably. But the necessity of having sufficient time to dart to the rear of the cupboard, to thrust the Journal safely under piles of fabric, and be back, demurely penning a letter to my father (who must be astonished at how faithful a correspondent I have proved!)—this makes me cautious, and consequently I miss many a chance.

But today Mr. Carson is gone to Welkin, to put a notice in the *Horizon* that he is 'standing for election' to the Legislature. Of course he will be elected—Welkin could scarcely *hope* for a more *impressive* man than my husband to rise and speak on its behalf—and then, for the two weeks or so that the Legislature is in session, he will be gone! *Two weeks* with this house free of him! Our bedchamber to myself! Oh, *heaven!*

It is now midafternoon. Constance is dozing by the fire. Without, the day glooms at us; the sky is overcast, though it does not rain, and the light fails: soon I shall have to light my candle. And I have leisure to puzzle over my thoughts.

Item: I am not sure I *like* being painted. One would think any female would be delighted to have her portrait done, and be forever in her bridal finery. Yet I find I am playing a part—assuming a false face, as it were—when I attempt to compose my features into the expression I presume I must have worn then: modest, hopeful, *ignorant*.

Item: I am troubled by the partnership which I as sitter or model must assume with the limner: he the creator, I the created; he the judge, I the judged. For this is a most talented young man who sees very clearly, and then (in his own way as ruthless as my husband) reveals in paint what he has seen. I feel a vague alarm, as if I may, all unwitting, have conspired to my own unmasking.

I was seated at first with the western window at my back, the north light on my face, and the portrait of Mr. Carson where I could easily see it did I but turn my eyes slightly. It is behind the limner, therefore behind Constance. I suspect this is deliberate on Mr. Rhys's part

. . . I am not sure; if so, he understands more than one would wish about the child's fear of her father. (But of course he would have to be blind not to see the child's fear!) What strikes me about the portrait is that I feel I know what my husband is thinking . . . what sort of thoughts he is likely to think. It is in the eyes, in the mouth. Judgment, and condemnation.

Still more surprising, Mr. Carson seems to see nothing of this . . . Or if he does, he approves of what the portrait reveals of him. Because he approves of the portrait: of that there can be no doubt. Often he will come in and stand before it, hands clasped beneath his coattails, and gaze at his own face unsmilingly but with a set to his shoulders which I would call *complacent*, did I not think it too weak a word. Then he stalks over and gazes at what the limner is doing, and gazes from the board to me, and frowns, dissatisfied.

"Could ye not smile at all? No, no—not grimace like a clown, just a *small* smile, no *teeth*," he says impatiently. "And your hands—let them rest so that the ring is turned to the viewer. Do not look down—lift your chin—"

Mr. Rhys and I were both relieved, this morning, when my husband came to bid us goodbye, saying he would be gone for the day. For the first time I was able to sit without feeling like a stick, or a doll, or a fool. Mindful of my husband's request that I 'show the colour of my eyes', I gazed towards Mr. Rhys, and was interested to watch his face as he worked. He had an abstracted look, as if he were alone, as if he did not hear the clatter of kitchenware through the open window, or the distant not unmusical *clang!* of the bellwether, or even the child reading from her primer:

"I must not slap, nor pinch, nor bite,
Nor do a single thing in spite;
Nor whistle, shout, or jump like boys,
To vex the family with noise . . ."

And then, when I was thinking I would be unable to move, I would be frozen to my chair, of a sudden Mr. Rhys appeared to *see* me, smiled, and begged my pardon for forgetting to release me.

"Truth to tell, I am enjoying painting you, Mistress

Carson," said he. "To look at you is a pleasure." And then he fell silent, and *looked* at me, as if astonished at what he had said. As if he was no longer sure why he had said it. (If ever he had been sure.)

But it could not be unsaid.

"Thank you, Mr. Rhys," I said, modest and demure, like my portrait.

But not matronly. I am frightened to find, when the limner's eyes are on me, I do not feel matronly at all. I feel *unmarried*. And this frightens me, because it is truly without conscious volition on my part. In attempting to re-assume my bridal expression, I deliberately sought to re-create my emotions of that day, but I most certainly did not—would not—seek to return to my pre-Mr. Carson self—this would be most dangerous folly! That I should feel not like Mistress Carson, wife, possession, shadow, but should feel, however tenuously, like Emelie Stark: that I should feel so, before the eyes of this *magician*-limner—this is madness!

I must guard my eyes. I must control my thoughts. I must look to my defences. I am a *married woman*, a citadel already taken, my allegiance already pledged. I may be a 'mere female', in my father's words, yet do I have free will. "We are free to choose," he told me. "Right or wrong, good or evil, upright and decent behavior, or sin. And our choice once made, be it the *wrong* choice, no excuse will save us."

But oh! I would wish that this limner did not have so *kind* a face! did not have so steady and *warm* a voice! "Look to the child," said he, "for I fear, Mistress Carson, she has fallen asleep and may catch a chill . . ." I can not remember *anyone else* in this house troubling himself about Constance! Not once!

September 20th

The portrait is done, and Mr. Carson is dissatisfied with it. It appears that whilst he was in Welkin, a shipment of bonnets came from Boston, and the lady milliner shewed one to my husband—a concoction like a bridal cake, of white satin and white lace and white tulle and a great white velvet rose (I can describe it because it is before me as I write)—and this is the latest fashion, said she, for brides: to be dressed all in white, a symbol of

purity and innocence. Could not Mr. Rhys redo my gown, make it proper bridal attire?

Impossible, sir, said Mr. Rhys firmly. Were Mistress Carson wearing white, it would affect the colour of her complexion; it would intensify the colour of her hair: as the snow, said he, brings forth colours in the bark of trees, which are unseen, or not remarked on, when the trees wear green.

Mr. Carson frowned again, and paced about, and stared from the portrait to me and back again. "So you must paint her again," he said at last, with reluctance. "I shall set this painting elsewhere, perhaps in the south parlour. Do another, this same size—my mind is set on having her bridal portrait there in her sitting room—but in this one she is to wear white."

"I have no white gown," I said.

"No matter," said Mr. Carson impatiently. "The limner can make do with his imagination."

"Sir, would it not be possible to borrow such a gown?" said Mr. Rhys. "Indeed, it would much simplify my task, though it is not for myself that I ask it. I would be more confident of pleasing you—the subtle effects of the colour—or rather its lack—are best not left to the faulty vision of the mind."

"I daresay I can arrange it," Mr. Carson said after a moment's thought. "In the meantime, I believe the child has recovered from her attack of fright and can now sit for you. Emelie, make sure she is presentable and wearing her best frock..."

And so Constance now sits where I sat, and I sit where she sat, behind the limner where I can watch his brush, and watch Constance's face and figure appear as if by magic. And Mr. Carson has gone once more to Welkin, and returned without any gown, but with the promise of one by next week. The milliner is uncommonly obliging, it seems, and will "whip up something in white" (she speaks as if it were meringue) forthwith.

September 23rd

And so I sit and listen to him talk to the child, and tell her little stories, and coax her to laugh, and I am no longer happy, sitting over my sewing; I know that whenever I shall look at Constance's portrait, her eyes gazing

trustingly, her whole expression happy . . . whenever I shall see this, I shall remember these mornings when it was just the three of us in this room, and Constance thrived and bloomed like a plant that needed the sun and at last was moved into the light . . . And I shall think—oh, I cannot think what I shall think! No, no, there are paths down which my thoughts *must not go!*

October 3rd

Mr. Carson is returned from Welkin with my 'bridal gown' and it is truly lovely—I could wish to have been married in it, were I happy at the idea of marriage at all. It is white muslin, in the French style, showing something of the shoulder, and the sleeves puffed charmingly. The edge of the bodice by the throat, and the line where bodice and skirt join, are trimmed with little loops made of the same material as the gown, these loops set to form little flowers, in the center of which are tiny beads, not real pearls, of course, Mr. Carson explained, but made of the shell of the oyster. I am enchanted by this dress, and take delight in donning it, and I confess I preen myself a bit, and Constance's eyes shine as she looks at me.

Mr. Carson frowns. "It is loose," he says. "Allow me to pin it at the back. A gown that is too large makes a female look like a broomstick."

Mr. Rhys says nothing. I look at him, and look away.

"Now will you sit here, Emelie, facing this way—" and my husband sets the chair with its back to his own portrait. "With all due respect for your preference for that north light, Mr. Rhys, you will agree my wife has a somewhat colourless face and needs the warmer rays from this west window."

Mr. Rhys says nothing. Constance takes her seat behind him, and I see her eyes travel past me, and rest on her father's portrait. Her face (whatever mine may be) is entirely devoid of colour.

"Constance," I say, "come sit by me and read to me, and so we can improve your time, and I shall enjoy myself, and this will help give my face a 'bridal look'!"

"Emelie, this is no occasion for wanton remarks," says Mr. Carson acidly, and I flush.

"What?" I stammer. "I merely meant—"

"If you do not cease your chatter, Mr. Rhys cannot begin."

So Constance runs to fetch her reader, and I am pinned securely into the borrowed gown, and Mr. Carson now at last goes out, to let us succeed or fail on our own merits. I gaze not at Mr. Rhys but past his face, past his red, red hair, and I endeavor not to be conscious of the perceptive gaze of his very blue, blue eyes, but to wipe my mind blank, empty of all thoughts, which I feel is the most propitious mental climate for an intended bride. And at my side Constance commences to read:

"Let *chil-dren* that would fear the *Lord*
Hear *what* their *teach-ers* say;
With *rev-rence* meet their *parent's* word
And with *de-light* o-bey."

She pauses, and looks up at me.

"Very good," I say. "But try to read less sing-song, my darling, more in normal conversational tone." I glance down and smile at her.

"Hold that, please, Mistress Carson," says Mr. Rhys. "Hold exactly so, I beg you!"

I look at Constance, a little smile on my lips. She reads on, contentedly, her voice in piping childish imitation of mine:

"Have you not *heard* what dreadful *plagues*
Are threaten'd by the *Lord*
To *him* that breaks his father's *law*
Or mocks his mother's *word*?
What *heavy* guilt upon him *lies*!
How *curse-ed* is his *name*!
The *rave-ens* shall pick out his *eyes*
And *eagles* eat the *same*—"

I look up, I cannot help it, and I meet the blue, blue eyes of Parsloe Rhys, and then—I cannot help it—I burst into laughter. At the very same moment he bursts into laughter.

As quickly as it came, our laughter went, and we fell silent, gazing at one another as if amazed to see the other standing (sitting) there.

I collected myself. "Constance, dear child," I said, "I think it would be better if you do not read more just now, but fetch your sampler and see what progress you can make with that."

She ran out, and he stood looking at me. And then he came near, and taking my chin in his hand—how smooth and firm and warm his fingers!—he turned my head a trifle. "The light is better so," he said in an ordinary voice, and stepped back. And then, in a low voice: "Would God I could paint you with laughter on your lips, and laughter in your eyes."

And he bent and kissed me on the mouth.

And I said not a word.

Chapter Fourteen



The next morning Justin St. John wasn't to pick me up until ten. I had my boxes packed and down by the main door of the Inn by eight; then I strolled across the Green to the café.

Ken Kendall remarked he was pleased to see I needed no rescuing; he offered me his *Herald*, then left me alone to read it. I looked it through for job offers, but found nothing within walking distance of Tamarack. It was going to be awkward without a car; I would just have to manage somehow. As Gam used to say, things you can always cope with, it's people who destroy you.

I had more coffee, and was gazing moodily out over the street, when I was surprised to see Merrill's dark red roadster scoot past; I had assumed she'd returned to Boston by now. In a process of thought one could call *sequitur*, it came to me I could refinish antiques; the barn where St. John kept his car might serve very well as a workshop. What an *unexpected* car it was, I mused: the interior immaculate, the seats covered with real leather. And it had been remarkably silent, though we had come

by the backest of back roads. Obviously it had not had 'the hell rusted out of it'.

Everything about our return to Welkin had taken me by surprise. To start with, my feet had been soaked by the time I reached the bottom of the slope, so heavy was the dew. And then we had set out not toward the west, as I had come, but toward the east, where the maples rustled their bleached leaves against the stars. "Give me your hand," he'd said where the lane plunged into blackness and the roots of the great trees ran like ribs across our path, and all the while we picked our way across them he'd held my hand as casually as if I were his sister. When we were in the open again, he flicked his light over the weeds standing shoulder-high, their frost-blackened leaves shivering in the rising wind-like tattered shrouds. "Your granduncle Henry's vegetable patch," he remarked. "Better have it plowed soon or the pine'll be joining the sumac."

Beyond this desolation there was a large barnlike structure with a doorway gaping blacker in the blackness. "Wait here," he'd said, "I'll bring the car out." And the headlights had leaped into life, and I could see a row of cubicles on the far side—stables, I supposed. Then the car slid out, and he'd leaned across to open the door for me, and the interior had lit for a moment and gone dark again as I shut the door, and we'd turned and driven off away from Tamarack, the headlights stabbing ahead making a bright golden tunnel of a road I'd never seen before. Then the road tipped like a chute to plunge into darkness and from nowhere the thought had pounced: *what if he stops this car and tells me to get out and find my own way back?* Here where it's so dark, where the hillsides are nothing but a tangle of branches spiked through by the stumps of slaughtered trees. "*Get out and walk, Emelie Milne, I'm sick of your company . . .*" and smile showing his white teeth, and his eyes would dance with candleflame . . .

All at once he was driving more slowly. "Sorry." Then: "Don't worry, I know this road like the proverbial back of my hand."

"I'm not worried about your driving," I said.

"What about, then?"

"Oh, nothing—I was just thinking—"

"Would you like me to pick you up in time for breakfast?"

In the darkness I flushed. "I wasn't thinking about money."

"Did I say you were?"

"No, but I don't blame you for thinking so. I usually am."

"Let me put it another way: would you care to check on how well I cook breakfast?"

"Thank you, I really can't," I said. "I have to turn up where I usually eat, or Ken Kendall will come looking for me."

"At Tamarack? What does he imagine may happen to you?"

"He thought you might not come, and I'd be stranded."

"Really? And did you agree that was likely?"

I said defensively, "How should I know if you'd turn up or not?"

"As a general rule when people say they'll meet you, you don't really expect they'll come at all?"

"No, of course not—I mean, yes—oh, why do you make so much of this? I simply didn't want to have to walk back to Welkin—people would talk!"

"And we can't have *that*, of course . . ."

I sipped my coffee and I wondered why Merrill was still in Welkin, and I didn't know if that was a *sequitur* or *non*.

About nine-fifteen I went along to Fenwick's office, where a young woman in a skirt a little shorter than was fashionable regretted that Mr. Fenwick had not left any keys for Mrs. Milne, but if I would wait, he would be in—she gave a doubtful glance at the clock—in fifteen minutes. It was ten of ten before I heard Gordon Fenwick climbing the stairs. "Hullo, early bird!"

I said, "Didn't Mr. Mansfield phone you? I'd like the rest of the keys to Tamarack, please—I'm moving in today."

"He called after you left, Mr. Fenwick," said the young woman, and recrossed her legs. "I put the message on your desk."

Gordon Fenwick grunted, and went on into the second room, where I could hear him opening and closing drawers.

"Mr. Fenwick," I called, "I'm rather in a hurry—I have to meet someone at ten o'clock—"

"If it's Ken Kendall, Emelie, relax—he's used to waiting for his fair fares!"

"It's not Ken, it's Mr. St. John," I said coldly.

He came out of his office, a large bunch of keys in his hand. "St. John, eh? I suppose he wants his rent back? When is he moving out?"

"Not until the first of November," I said, and I could practically hear the wheels turning in his head. "The keys, please." And I held out my hand.

A sleek dark gray Audi was drawn up before the Welkin Inn. Pale gray bucket seats, a row of grocery sacks with half a dozen stalks of French bread—yes, it must be St. John's.

He was waiting for me in one of the green cubes. Laying aside his newspaper, he rose, unsmiling, to his feet.

"I'm sorry I'm late—I have to check out—"

"And your luggage?"

"Ready to go." I waved a hand toward the cardboard boxes. When I'd settled my bill and came out on the steps, I found the bellhop, under St. John's eye, stowing my cartons into the luggage compartment with as much care as if they were the most luxurious matched set.

Mr. St. John appeared not in the mood for conversation. We shot silently out of town on a secondary road that doubled and twisted along the rocky course of a narrowing stream. It was indeed shorter than the route through Ransom's Bridge, for in less than three miles we turned off the hardtop onto the rough track that led steeply in from the east. As we passed the cut-over slope, the sun streaming through the battered underbrush laughed at my fears of the night before.

"But it's so ugly!" I said abruptly.

"No wonder your Gam hated Henry. That sort of slashing—grab all you can and the hell with the next generation—is nothing short of a sin. Too bad it isn't a crime as well."

"I suppose he needed the money," I said. "Dixon Mansfield said he didn't handle his as well as Aunt Martha did hers."

At that, he shot me a speculative glance, but said merely, "There are limits to what a man ought to do to get it."

"Oh, I agree," I said. I wondered if he was thinking there are limits, too, to what a woman ought to do, and if he thought I was overstepping them. If that's what he's thinking, I thought, gazing at the line of maples which blocked our path, he doesn't know what it is to need a house, a shelter, somewhere to hide. Men are lucky: they can make their own.

"You'll have to walk from here." He opened the trunk and began to set my boxes out. "A couple of trips will get everything in the house. Not worth coming the other way and announcing our arrival to Deese Ransom." He swung the box of books onto his shoulder. "Whom I strongly suspect of jacking deer. Can you bring Baby Bear?"

"Oh, certainly," I said.

"What's in Papa Bear?"

"Books." I had to smile.

"And Mama Bear?"

"My clothes."

He glanced at me, patently annoyed. "Are you having the rest shipped by express? I'll have to go to White River after them—they don't deliver to Welkin any more."

"All my clothes," I said shortly. And I would be *damned* if I'd explain. Let him think I usually packed my things in cardboard boxes labeled THIS SIDE UP and DON'T PILE MORE THAN SIX HIGH.

"You do travel light. I approve. My wife used to look as if she was on safari when we were merely weekendng."

I almost said it, but I didn't. *Oh, are you married?* I almost said. Although what difference did it make? I could rent a room to a married man, surely, without any more impropriety than to a bachelor. Less, actually.

"Actually, I was robbed," I said abruptly.

"Recently?"

"Yes." Then, lightly: "Funny—I was robbed the same day I met Merrill—although 'met' isn't exactly the word—"

"Tough," he said sympathetically. "Two disasters in one day."

We stalked without speaking up the slope across the matted leaves to the west wing, where, still balancing the box of books on one shoulder, he unlocked the Bible door, ducking his head as he followed me in. He set the books next to my plants on the trestle table and handed me the key.

"You'll be wanting to keep this. The key to the terrace door is on the hook. Those to the head of the stairs and into the main house ought to be on that bunch Fenwick gave you. You'll be snug and safe in your fortress here." He stood regarding me for a moment or two. Then: "You don't approve of the way I talk about her, is that it? But ours was not one of your friendly modern divorces, Mrs. Milne."

"Merrill?" I said incredulously.

"Didn't Fenwick introduce you?"

"I thought—but he said she was a widow—"

"So she is. Mrs. Merrill Mansfield St. John Broome. She got what she wanted the second time around." He smiled. "A husband who was old and rich. I'll bring the rest of the stuff up while you unpack your plants."

When next he came in, bringing the box with my clothes and the first of the sacks of groceries, his manner was as easy and friendly as it had been the evening before; one would think he had flipped a switch marked *Be Nice to Emelie*. Or, rather, to *Mrs. Milne*, as he was scrupulous to call me.

"I think we'll have rain tomorrow. Perhaps after lunch you'd like to meet your nearest neighbor, Mrs. Milne. No harm in letting *him* know we're here—I'm damned sure he's poaching deer on your property." He grinned. "I told him I didn't think you'd object, as long as he shares his kill."

I stared at him. "What right did you have to say such a thing?"

He shrugged. "He has to make a living, and he's not greedy. He spaces his kills nicely, saving for himself what he can eat before it spoils, and selling the rest, I should imagine."

"But—shooting deer out of season! That's illegal!"

"Why so it is," he said.

"Is that where you got the venison for our supper last night?"

He hesitated. "No," he admitted. "I shot that one. Pentacost has a new bow, and I wanted to try it out."

"What a strange name! And where does he sell his illegal venison, this Pentacost? Who would buy it?"

"My dear Mrs. Milne, in almost any club in New York or Boston you'll find venison on the menu. Where do you

think they get it? Or buffalo steak, or moose, or bear? Or did you think that in our fair society law-breaking is done solely by the poor devils who have to scrabble for a living?"

With that he went out again, and I arranged my plants along the various windowsills, and put my books on a shelf in the adjacent pantry. He was stocking up on groceries, it seemed to me, as if he expected snow, not rain. I helped make room in the cupboard by shoving together glass jars of rice, sugar, cereals and flour. "You can't leave anything in paper cartons," he remarked, "or you'll have an invasion of insects—bees in the sugar are the worst. Now that it's getting cold the field mice are moving in; the squirrels, I suspect, never moved out." He grinned. "The end sections here are lined with tin; I suppose they were designed to store bread. I appropriated one for my clothes. You'd better do the same."

When he'd gone out, I dragged the Mama Bear box to the cupboard and, not sure which side was to be mine, tried the door on the left, closing it hastily when I saw that section had been rigged up with clothes rods—rods from which hung several sports jackets, three or four business suits, as well as—I couldn't believe my eyes—a dinner jacket. None of it seemed at all suitable for an itinerant artist. Dear God, had he stolen them? I was wondering, when St. John came striding up the slope with the last sack of supplies.

I flushed guiltily. "I'm sorry—I'm afraid I opened your side by mistake—"

"Not your fault. I'd've had my things out of there by now but I hadn't a key to the rest of the house."

Of course he hadn't stolen them—what ailed me? Unless he'd also stolen the car, and the money for the rent, and for the dinner, and for the wine . . .

"Have you any preference where you'd like me to be, Mrs. Milne? In the far wing? Or right overhead, in case you should be haunted by that ghost who bade you welcome? We could have a signal—rap three times and I'll come running."

"I wouldn't advise that room," I said coolly. "If there are ghosts at Tamarack, that's where they are, and I don't want to have to come to *your* rescue! As for the east

wing, I don't know if you'd be comfortable there—I've never been in it."

He remarked he thought his choice should have my approval, and so we went along the terrace to the east door.

"Perhaps you are wondering what I am doing with my entire wardrobe here at Tamarack," he said, trying one of the keys from the bunch I'd handed him. "As it happens, this is my only address at the moment, and now and again I have business in Boston or Montreal." He tried another.

"As it happens, I wasn't wondering at all," I said loftily.

"I only mention it—" he had succeeded in inserting a key—"in case, hampered by your arbitrary schedule of residence, you may have errands you care to entrust to me." He was giving all his attention to the door, now, which refused absolutely to open, though we both plainly heard the lock turn. "Perhaps it's bolted," he said. And then he was gazing in some dismay at the knob, which had come off in his hand. "Oh, I *am* sorry—I didn't mean to be so destructive!"

I had to laugh. "Not your fault," I assured him.

We had no trouble entering through the connecting door from the south parlor, and found ourselves in the first of the two small rooms facing the terrace. Sure enough, the terrace door was secured by a stout bolt. I said, "All anybody would have to do is break the glass." I went to the window and attempted to raise the shade; with a sharp rattle it came off its roller and fell to the floor in a cloud of dust and a peppering of dry insect bodies.

"Go on into the next before you choke," St. John said.

But the second room was as bare as the first and had no other way out; we were obliged to retreat, only to find the door to the rest of the wing locked.

"This ceases to be amusing," St. John said, trying key after key without success. "Who on earth went through here locking every possible—hold it, this one goes in."

We found ourselves in a good-sized room facing north, with another of those corner fireplaces yawning like a mouth agape. In the west wall was the connecting door to the main house (locked and bolted), to the north, an

outside door in solid oak (bolted top and bottom), and across from it, stairs leading to the cellar—I stared into a sour blackness and shut the door hastily—and to the second floor. These were steep, with a sharp turn just before one reached the upstairs hall.

Here the area corresponding to the Hogarth room was divided in two, the hallway being an irregular L to give access to both rooms. However, this hallway also had its half-bath with pull-chain toilet, and its door, inevitably locked, to the cross-corridor of the main house.

“But not, I am thankful to say, bolted,” said St. John, unlocking it.

“Odd there’s no real bathroom in this wing,” I said. “Didn’t Elizabeth Stearns, mother of five sons, rate one, do you suppose?”

“Perhaps she had a slew of servants to run back and forth with jugs of water to a hip-bath.” He was unlocking the door to the south room, and sunlight spilled into the hallway.

It was a small room, and shabby, with a squatty stove plunked in front of the blocked-off fireplace, and one wall converted into floor-to-ceiling cupboards. The other walls were covered with stencils of lilacs in pale mauves and lavenders, the heart-shaped leaves making a stylized pattern between the blossoms. The stenciling was none too clear, for the paint had faded and the walls dulled by grime; nevertheless the effect was delicate and feminine, and (I thought) sad, though no doubt that was a purely subjective response on my part.

“Madam landlady, this will do nicely,” St. John said. “What more could a man want—a stove, a place to hang his hat, if he has one, and sun in the morning?”

“The roof leaks,” I said bleakly, gazing at an ugly brown blotch above the window. “I wonder if that lavatory works.”

It didn’t, of course. When I opened the faucet, not so much as a sigh came out.

“I expect it’s turned off in the cellar,” St. John said. “I’ll go turn it on. Be ready to bail for your life.”

He clattered down the narrow twisting stairs. As his steps passed out of earshot, I stood listening to the silence for a moment, and then I went softly over to the lilacs room, almost tiptoeing, as if I were a servant ven-

turing where I had no right to be. I was half prepared for a repetition of the fit of nerves the Hogarth room had induced. I stood for fully a minute in the shabby, sunlit room, gazing down where the faded glory of the tamaracks was mirrored in the blue-gray waters of the little lake, and as far as I could discern I felt no untoward reaction to the room in any way. Whatever joys these walls had embraced had long since dissolved in the mists of time; whatever griefs they had sheltered seemed safely buried and forgotten.

I heard a sound of gurglings rising upwards, and I ran back in time to witness the final flatulence of the pipes followed by a gush of rusty water, and more air, and then the water running clear. I closed the tap, and water began thumping into the ceiling-high tank. When it was full I pulled the chain, it flushed without mishap, and thumped and gurgled full again.

"Noisy but serviceable," I said briskly, as St. John came back up the stairs. "Except there's no hot water. Nothing comes out of that faucet, not even cold."

"It's still turned off. You have a woodburning affair of museum primitiveness down there that I should imagine was lit only on demand."

"Well, so that's the rest of the house," I said, and I couldn't for the life of me have said why it all seemed such an anticlimax, but it did. I felt as if I'd been demoted from Emelie-come-home to a temporary Mrs. Blaikson, Madam Landlady—"That word has a disagreeable ring for me—" yes, that was probably it.

"I usually have just a sandwich at noon, Mrs. Milne," he said. "Will that be enough for you?"

"Yes, thank you, but do let me make them, Mr. St. John." *Mrs. Milne* . . . But I couldn't ask him to call me Emelie, not now, not at the start of our isolation here. Probably he was relieved not to be on a first-name basis anyway. *Mrs. Milne* could be depended upon to keep her distance and not interfere with his work.

We ate on the terrace, in the warm sun, and then we set out to visit Pentacost Jones.

St. John strode down the broad steps from the terrace and began to weave his way through the tangle of frost-blighted milkweed, mullein, and yearling sumac. As best I could I matched my stride to his, and attempted to copy

the arbitrary twistings of the invisible path he was following. As we descended the slope, it seemed to me we were tracing some sort of design, for we seldom made a turn at anything but a right angle, and the paths we were following—if they *were* paths—were invariably straight. It came to me that buried beneath this blanket of victorious barbarians there might be a formal garden as stylized as an 18th century parterre. But how absurd! Which of Israel Carson's wives had yearned for such prim symmetry here on this steep slope, a day's journey from the nearest settlement? Here would have been the ideal location for a 'tamed wilderness' garden, instead of this doomed-to-failure evocation of an elegant stateliness as out of place as . . . as St. John would be now, if he were wearing the dark broadcloth he'd worn to Gam's funeral, instead of tough whipcord trousers and suede shirt, both far more impervious, I noted enviously, to the brambles and hardhack than my poor slacks and sweater.

We had reached the lake. Near where we stood fish darted in the dark, clear water among the reeds, and the tamarack crowded close, shading the water from the warmth of the sun. Tamarack . . . I turned to look back at the house. Veiled by the thickening air, remote and lovely, it seemed suspended at the top of the slope . . . not quite real . . . a house caught in a trance . . .

"It's the way I first saw it," he said quietly, "from here, by the lake. It's the best view, isn't it? Intentionally so, I think."

There was an open admiration in his eyes, almost a covetousness.

I said, "But there's no road down here."

"A public way? Of course not—that would have let any casual passer-by share this view, and apparently your Israel Carson was anything but openhanded with his possessions. How will you do the gardens when you restore them?"

"Aunt Martha would have flooded the whole slope with color," I said. "Color and scent. She always said a garden should be generous—" *Like a loving woman*, Gam had added, but I (miserly) held my tongue. "Perhaps I ought not to make any drastic changes," I ended lamely.

"My advice is to do as you please," he said. "No point in being hamstrung by the hangups of your ances-

tors. Watch your step or you'll be soaked to your knees."

Across the open waters of the lake came a thin and gawky bird. On angular wings it circled low, to settle in the reeds not five yards from where we stood motionless. I could see its colorful legs, a greenish yellow, and its long arched neck, a burnished brown. It hunched its head into its shoulders and waited, immobile, for one of those darting fish to swim near.

St. John began to move from one hummock to another as silently as the wind stirring the tamaracks, and I tried to do the same, but could not have been as silent, or perhaps our movements themselves disturbed the bird, for suddenly it took flight, and emitting a series of hoarse croaks (whether in annoyance or in warning, I could not tell) it vanished behind the trees on the opposite shore.

St. John was smiling. "You have another tenant."

"Whatever was that?"

"*Heron vert*—green bittern. I see her here often, usually around sunset when the fish are rising. The nest must be near."

"In the reeds?"

"More likely in those tamaracks."

"Haven't you seen it?"

"I haven't looked particularly. Why disturb her? She has more right here than we have."

We had passed the bog at the head of the lake and were starting up a rough track when St. John stopped, then said quietly, "We were coming to see you, Pentacost Jones. Mrs. Milne would like to make your acquaintance."

From behind a thicket of hemlock stepped the gravedigger, or goblin, or whatever he was. He looked at me as if I puzzled him; then he turned to St. John, and as openly as if they were alone, remarked, "Watch out for her—she's sly."

"Now what the devil do you mean by that?"

"She says one thing, then she says another. She told me her name's Emelie Carson. Though maybe she was lyin', at that." He gave me a penetrating stare. "Emelie Carson is dead and buried these hundred years an' more. *She* looks alive, though, don't she? *Is* she? Are ye sure? Have ye touched her?" His cackle was an uncanny imitation of the heron's indignant croak.

"Enough to know she's not dead," St. John said evenly. "Mind your tongue, you old goat." He turned to me. "He's not half as daft as he pretends, Mrs. Milne. He doesn't like visitors, and he figures if people think he's a bit crazy they'll leave him alone. Don't overdo it, Pentacost. Mrs. Milne—Emelie Carson Milne—is Martha's great-grandniece. Martha left Tamarack to her, and if you've a grain of sense you'll tone down your performance and act neighborly."

Pentacost laid his finger by his nose. "They tell me I've lost my mind. Can't say I miss it much!" He laughed again, an old man's wheezing laugh. "So what brings you?"

"You know they buried Miss Martha in Welkin, don't you?" Pentacost's face crumpled, and he nodded. "It was a mistake. She wanted to be buried here. I'm going to have her moved." I gaped at him, too stunned to speak. "We'll need your help. The hitch is going to be getting the coffin in over this road."

Pentacost turned and looked at the track along which we'd come. Lower down, near the lake, it was exceedingly boggy; up here the soil had washed away between the shelving rocks.

He said happily, "It'll give me joy to welcome Martha home. Nothin' easier—we'll bring her on a stone boat. Feller over to East Welkin has made him a new one."

"Think you can borrow his tractor, too?" St. John said gravely.

"*Tractor!* Where's your manners? Noisy, rackety, stinkin' things! Oxen—that's what we'll be wantin'. A good team of oxen, quiet and decent. Deese Ransom's 'll do fine, and he'll be pleased to do us a favor." He smiled slyly. "I'll do the dickerin'—he'd just try to cheat you, but there ain't nobuddy borned who kin cheat Pentacost Jones 'n' get away with it."

"I believe you." St. John smiled at him affectionately. "I'll let you know when we want them. Mrs. Milne and I are going on to the graveyard and pick out a likely spot, so we'll be saying good day to you, Pentacost Jones."

"Good day to you, Justin. And to you, Emmy. I'll not call you by that other name ye gives yourself—ye've no right to it, have ye? No right at all." And he slipped from sight behind the hemlocks.

Hurrying after St. John, I said somewhat breathlessly, "Why didn't you tell me you were going to move Gam?"

"I thought it was obvious it was the next step."

I said doggedly, "I really can't accept—I mean, you *must* let me pay the costs—pay you back, whatever you spend—"

He did not slacken his pace. "Don't be insulting," he said curtly. "I didn't send flowers to the funeral. If I had, would you have demanded the florist's bill?"

Now the road was nearly level, channeled between steep banks. Off to our left, just beyond a great incongruous clump of lilac, there was a small, secluded graveyard shaded by towering elms and maples, a lilac-invaded place of moss and ferns and old, thin gravestones. A waist-high stone wall marked off the square, and the rough wooden gate at the entrance was propped open, sagging on one hinge.

"Enter, and meet the family," St. John said. As I caught the mockery that underlay his words I almost wished he had not come. What there was to be amused at here, I could not imagine. As I went from stone to stone, it seemed to me this was a place of great sadness. So many hopes and dreams come to nothing . . . come to dust . . . and almost all of them too soon.

Ismay Carson, I read. 1846–1905. That would be my great-great-grandfather, I thought, and felt a tingle up my spine. Beneath this very ground lay—what? a handful of bones?—which at one time had been a living, breathing man, a man of passion, who had begot my great-grandfather, who in his turn had begot my grandfather. In my blood ran a trace of . . . of whatever lay here. And I laid my hand on my wrist, and I could feel the blood pumping, and I thought, *hello Ismay Carson*.

There was the stone to Agathe duPré, his second wife, and to Adelaide Gore, his first—my great-great-grandmother—but where was her son Luke, Martha's brother, who had played hide and seek amongst these stones? I found *Luke*, 1897–1944, but that would be my grandfather, Martha's nephew, whom she had loved as if he were her own. Where was the Luke who had married Catherine O'Reilly, who forfeited Tamarack because he was an honorable man? Wasn't he allowed to come home even in death?

"Don't miss the rear of Ismay's stone," St. John said. "Martha told me she erected it—Henry was too cheap, no doubt—and I fancy she wrote the verse, too."

*His birth brought death to his mother,
His life exile to his son:
At his end an impenitent sinner—
Let us pray his atonement begun.*

"Frank, wouldn't you say?" St. John observed impartially.

I made no comment. Decorous and polite as a sightseer in a cathedral, I moved to the next row. *Trueblood Carson—1821–1864*. I was counting off the great-greats when St. John remarked conversationally: "The ardent supporters of women's rights would approve of the Carson cemetery. All the wives keep their maiden names on the tombstones, you'll notice."

"Except this one," I said. "*Constance Carson, Ja 5, 1816–Nov 17, 1846—honour'd wife of Trueblood Carson martyr'd mother of their infant son Ismay*. 'Carson'—was she a cousin, do you suppose? That's the first time there's been all that extra biographical data, too. The months and the days, I mean."

"Not the first time, the last," he corrected me dryly. "I daresay later on it didn't seem like such a good idea. Certainly nothing so editorially passionate occurs again." He nodded toward a row of stones against the far wall. "Over there is the founder of the dynasty, old Israel himself, flanked by his wives all neatly numbered and their production noted." Whistling softly to himself, he strolled off.

I picked my way with care over the uneven ground. *Israel Carson 1778–1845—In sin are we begot In sin are we begone*: had he chosen his own epitaph, this mysterious Israel? Or was it, too, an ambiguous salute by one of his more pious descendants?

On his right were two stones; on his left, one.

Johanna Spooner, beloved wife of Israel, in the 20th year of her life, & her infant daughter, born at dawn and dead at sunset, this 12th day of June 1804 Death thou art fowle & I despize thee. Wind and frost had softened

the letters but not the sharpness of the grief. How long had they had together? One year? Two?

By comparison, the one next to it seemed almost curt: *Elizabeth Pinney 4 Dec 1782-5 Ja 1816 2nd wife to Israel Carson*. It was difficult to read the dates; perhaps the stone had been damaged by vandals.

And then there she was: *Emelie Stark 1799-1822 3rd wife to Israel mother of Trueblood*. At least *she* didn't die in childbirth, I thought in relief, and went to check Trueblood's stone. 1821. At any rate she hadn't died when he was born. By chance I glanced across to Constance, Trueblood's wife, and then, with a sick feeling, I stared more closely at the date of birth: *Ja 5, 1816*. Back to Elizabeth Pinney: died 5 Ja 1816.

"A touch of incest, it would appear," St. John remarked with maddening insouciance. "It's an ancient, one might even say a royal custom. The Pharaohs married their sisters as a matter of religious principle, I believe."

I whispered, "But this is awful . . ."

"She was only his half-sister, after all," St. John said, as if determined to be fair. Then, as if the notion had just struck him: "No wonder you Carsons prefer your burial ground isolated."

I whirled on him. "You listen to me, Justin St. John!" I said through gritted teeth. "You are here *solely* on suffering, do you understand? How *dare* you make fun of this—this *holy* place? What do you know of why he did what he did—or what he felt—what his reasons were? What do you know of Trueblood Carson, anyway? Or of Emelie Stark? Or—or of Emelie Milne, for that matter? Nothing! Nothing at all!"

"You're entirely right," he said easily. "It's nothing but guesswork on my part—an infuriating habit. Sorry. By the way, Israel's fourth wife—"

"It's all very well for you to offer to move Martha," I cut in hotly, "and don't think I don't appreciate it—I do, very much—but you're doing it for *her*, not for me, and if you think it buys you the right to r-ridicule my family—"

"Certainly not!" he said hastily. "God knows there's nothing laughable about the Carsons!" I glared at him helplessly. "As I was about to say, the redoubtable Elizabeth Stearns is buried over there, next to the lilacs. A

nice touch, I think—keeping her distance in death as well as in life. Shows decent feeling.”

Swallowing my fury, I went over to meet the last of Israel's wives. *And her sons shall rise up and call her blessed.*

“A welcome change in mood, isn't it?” St. John remarked, lounging against the wall on the other side of the yard. “And here's your great-grandfather, by the way—Martha's brother Luke. Plenty of room for her next to him, if you think this site suitable.” As I drew near, he moved away, as if finally even he had acquired some semblance of decent feeling.

Luke was in the corner, against the wall, where he was protected from the wind. Yet he had shade in summer, I thought, for the mosses were thick and the maidenhair fern as yet untouched by frost.

I knelt, and sat back on my heels. *Hello, Luke. I felt unaccountably shy. Martha's coming, Luke . . . Wait for her, she'll not be long now.* And I knew I was not alone . . . I was surrounded, by whom or what I did not know . . .

Of course I wasn't alone! St. John was leaning against a spike of marble put up to the memory of Donnet Mansfield. He had ceased his whistling and now was singing softly to himself.

As I caught the words, “What's that?” I said, startled.

“Ophelia's song. You know—when she's going mad. Have I offended you again? It's the least ribald of her songs—”

“The words!” I said impatiently. “What are the words?”

Enunciating clearly (as if I were a somewhat backward pupil), he sang in a deep but not unpleasing voice:

“He is dead and gone, lady,
He is dead and gone;
At his head a grass-green turf;
At his heels a stone.”

“That's it! That's what I mean!” I looked around me at the garden of gravestones—Israel's, and his wives', and Trueblood's. “Aren't their *heads* under the stones, then?”

He shrugged. "I have no idea. I never thought about it."

"Well, I have," I said breathlessly. "I've always assumed that you—I mean, whoever is buried—is buried facing out. With the stone at your head. Dear God, who would want to be buried the other way, facing the—staring at one's name and the dates of one's life—"

After a moment, he straightened. He came over to where I knelt by Luke's grave, and he went down on one knee beside me, so that his eyes were nearly on a level with mine.

"You think the dead are still alive, don't you?"

"Yes," I said with difficulty. "I guess I do."

"They're not, Emelie," he said, in much the same tone he had used when he first spoke to Pentacost Jones. "Believe me, there's nothing left—nothing to be afraid of, or to try to please, or conciliate. Nothing!"

My eyes fell before his, and I turned my head away. "I know," I said. *Luke Carson—1877–1897 Beloved brother of Martha husband of Catherine father of Luke.* Gam must have put up his stone, too, I thought dully. "And anyway it doesn't matter, does it? Lots of time you couldn't tell, could you? Which way the head is, I mean."

He stood up. "We'd better be going back, Mrs. Milne," he said. "The rain may catch us if we linger."

Like with Gam, I thought. In her new bronze skin, who could ever tell which way she's looking?

Chapter Fifteen



The following morning after a solitary breakfast (for St. John had planned to go out at daybreak on a 'prowling expedition', he told me), I equipped myself with notebook and pencil, and room by room I searched out the damage which time and neglect had inflicted upon the house. I found myself enjoying this tour of inspection; it

seemed reassuringly sane and normal to be deciding under which category a flaw should be listed: Repair Postponable, or Repair Imperative.

Of the Imperatives, only the roof threatened to involve the outlay of much money. A number of slates had been cracked, either by ice or by the infiltrating grapevine, and the plaster of the second floor ceilings was much discolored, and in some places sagged loose. None of it could safely be ignored, nor was it anything I could do myself.

Everywhere throughout the unheated house the woodwork and paneling had suffered. Perhaps it was lucky Henry hadn't left the furniture to Gam after all, but had forced Dixon Mansfield to put it in storage until Catherine O'Reilly's descendants might be found. Even if the pieces were of the most primitive design and (if Henry had bought them) of the shabbiest manufacture, still they would be quite old, and valuable for that reason alone. It would be a shame to have them ruined by the damp.

As I proceeded from one room to the next, listing where a panel buckled, where the paint was loose, I realized I was putting off the Hogarth room until last, in the hope, I supposed, that St. John might return and might just happen to feel like accompanying me. The role of clinging vine ill becomes either divorcée or widow, I told myself scornfully, and I took up the keys and succeeded in matching one to the door at the top of the pantry stairs. Then, much as one plunges off a high dive, I thrust open the door to the Hogarth room and went in.

The rain had ceased before daybreak and the room swam with light. To the west and north the sun sparkled on rain-washed banners of melting gold, mauve, and purple; the south windows were a mosaic of translucent greens. Against such beauty the Hogarth panels struck me as obscene.

I went over to a south window and began testing for loose putty, ill-fitting stops, or rotted sills. Through the crêpe-paper leaves of the grapevine I could see an imprudent robin trotting about his chores on the terrace below: run run run, stop, cock the head and listen, runrun-run . . . The silly creature, I thought tenderly, he'll wake some morning and find himself frozen to death . . . And I was pleased with myself because here I was in the Hogarth room being calm, brave, sensible, and even happy.

I moved along past the first panel, glancing once again at the fresh and not exactly *innocent* face of the country girl . . . ignorant, rather, and perhaps even a trifle apprehensive . . . stupidly trusting? stupidly optimistic, anyway . . . no doubt avaricious or she wouldn't have fallen in with the madam's plans . . . Well, it was no concern of mine.

I strolled over to a west window. "Clear orchard of 'weed' trees," I wrote under Postponable. "Cut for firewood." I glanced idly at the root cellar, and thought perhaps I ought to make a note to explore it . . . no, surely I could remember anything so obvious! With an effort, I transferred my gaze to the window before me, felt with trembling fingers along the loosened putty . . . and knew I was no more alone in this room than I had been in the graveyard.

Again, who was with me I did not know. Perhaps it was only that poor foolish harlot, dying in misery on the opposite wall . . . No, if she haunted anywhere, it would be somewhere in the more decayed parts of London, wherever the brothels had festered: she wouldn't be *here*, and anyway, she would have no reason to haunt me—I was no kin of hers.

Then was it Catherine O'Reilly? Bride and widow of that poor lad lying alone in the corner against the stone fence . . . bought off . . . selling her son. Did she protest the price? Try to haggle for more? Was it she whose tears—*whose tears I was shedding*? I gazed at the root cellar and I wept without a sound, my tears splashing ludicrously on the windowsill. I was not afraid. It was grief, not fear, which saturated the room: a grief so intense it was like an amputation.

"*Oh, Bard—Bard!*" I sank to my knees and rocking back and forth I sobbed as openly as a child. I grieved for the love we had not shared, for the children we had not had, for the years together we had been denied, for the loneliness, the unbearable aloneness, of his death.

When at last my anguish was somewhat eased and my tears spent, I rose, and pausing only to lock the door at the head of the stairs, I went down and bathed my face, letting the icy water run over my wrists. All the while I was careful not to look at myself in the mirror, as if I

might see something there that I would be better off not knowing.

I took my notebook and went out onto the terrace in the sun. I would do a sketch of the gardens; I would begin to think about what to plant, and where. Thank God for blazing light, I thought, for warmth, for warm blood pulsing, for healthy, normal, ordinary thoughts, for here and now: this minute: sun-filled and—and *sane*.

I was not morbid, or suggestible, or really superstitious. I'd explored the house alone—all of it. I had grieved, but that was natural. It was *unnatural* not to—openly, I mean—when I found him . . . when I'd seen his face. It was a sign of mental *health*, that's what it was, that I had wept—that I'd been able to weep—in the Hogarth room. Health and sanity.

I perched on the stone wall and sipped a cup of coffee and tried to corral my thoughts. The warmth of the fleeing sun would linger here, and would return again early in April. I could plant snow crocus against the house wall, or in little unexpected pockets along the path, and they would open their pastel cups while there was still snow against the north of the house. It would be May here while it was March elsewhere. A planting of sturdy shrubs would divert the wind where it swept across the open slope on the east . . . some of the vibernums, perhaps interspersed with flowering crab. As a project it was Postponable in Spades, I thought, smiling faintly, and went along the terrace to the west.

Beyond the tangle of raspberries was the root cellar: not quite an eyesore, I reflected, but certainly no asset. Could it be put to any practical use? Or ought one (Postponable of the Postponable) to have it leveled off? I set my cup on the terrace wall and waded past the berry bushes to investigate.

It proved to be not an excavation at all, but a kind of semi-subterranean building. I ducked as I entered, lest I crack my head on the stone lintel. Within, I could stand upright without cringing, for the ceiling, consisting of slabs of rock laid the full width, was nearly six feet above the hard-packed floor. Toward the rear there was a chimney-like opening down which a fair amount of light filtered. The air was surprisingly fresh and the rock walls dry and free of moss.

I could not imagine to what use I could put such a cave. There was plenty of room for food storage in the cellar under the main house. Perhaps Israel Carson had built it for a root cellar while he was still living in his 'half-Cape'. Perhaps he had even dwelt here first, erecting this rock hut and sodding it over and living in it while the bricks were transported over the mountains, and the kitchen flagged, and the fireplace built. It could not have been a single summer's work, that west wing—unless, of course, he had had a team of laborers. But somehow I thought not: he would still have been a young man, with his way to make, and a wife with a baby coming. They could have taken shelter here that first winter. That would explain the chimney hole, which would surely prove a nuisance later when one wanted to keep the frost out.

Perhaps St. John was mistaken and it wasn't a root cellar at all. Perhaps it was some kind of smoke house. Was there any way to close off that opening? To take a good look, I'd have to move away from the entrance . . . I'd have to take five or six steps in . . . I picked my way over the uneven floor until I was directly beneath the vent. Not four paces behind me was an open doorway; right over my head was a clear and unobstructed passage for air. I had only to tip my head back and I would see the sky. *What on earth ailed me, that I could not get my breath?* There was no air left here . . . what air there was froze in my throat—

"Stop it, you fool!" I gasped aloud, and looked up—looked into the light, into the interlacing branches of ash trees dressed in mourning. It was like looking up from a well, or a dungeon. The vent, too narrow to permit anything more than smoke to escape, appeared nearly four feet in length; I marveled at the thickness of the soil that formed the structure's roof. Like in a grave, I thought: plenty of good earth over you to make you stay put, make you stay down where you belong . . .

The doorway was so far away I could scarcely see it. It was so far away I could never reach it with what breath I had left . . . I took one step wading against the tide and then another step, and my feet were lead. They were frozen, as if the tide was a winter sea. I stumbled over the uneven ground, over a bare root . . . or was the floor

reaching for me, trying to trap me? *Dear God let me have air!*

And then I was outside and plunging past the lilacs which clawed my face and through the raspberries which snagged my clothes; I was back in the sun on the terrace, the blessed sweet air filling my lungs and I could not get enough, I was breathing as if I had run a long way without stopping, and my chest hurt.

Oh, God! There came St. John striding up the slope! I fought to calm myself. I wanted to indulge in a fit of weeping, or—or cling to somebody who would hold me close and assure me it was all nonsense, there was nothing to be afraid of, it was all nerves. Well, there was only St. John coming steadily closer, and if I let him see my fear, he'd use it against me somehow—I knew he would!

I could think of no sensible word of greeting. From the chill on my skin I knew my forehead was wet with sweat; I wished I'd had the wit to wipe it dry. "Oh, hello," I said inanely. I sat down on the terrace wall and picked up my empty coffee cup, pretending to sip from it.

He regarded me thoughtfully. "Where have you been now?"

"P-planning the garden."

"I see. Is there any more coffee?" Anxious to escape his eyes, I rose to get it, when, "Sit down!" he said sharply. "I need no woman to wait on me!" By the time he returned with the pot and another cup, I had regained my self-possession, or so I thought.

"We'll divide it," he said, pouring half into my cup. He sat on the top step and stretched out his legs. "You look as if you've been seeing ghosts again. Where were they this time?"

I stiffened. "Why do you keep saying such things? 'Hearing ghosts'—'seeing ghosts'—are you trying to put such a notion in my head? What have you got to gain by it?"

"I'll go make some decent coffee," he said, rising. "You could chew this." He strolled to the door. "I'm not trying to tamper with the contents of your mind, Mrs. Milne. What possible advantage could there be in having a landlady given to fits of superstitious terror?" He surveyed me dispassionately for a long moment, and I knew my face was afire. "You are not the heroine of *Gaslight*," he

added cuttingly, "nor am I a villain. I'm not in the least flattered when you accuse me of having designs on your sanity."

My offensively defensive words of Saturday had left a lump of distrust between us, and Sunday had been a lonely and isolated sort of day.

So when I remarked at breakfast on Monday that I hoped next time he was in Welkin he wouldn't mind to ask the roofer to give an estimate, I was truly surprised when he offered to lend me his car, adding with a shrug, "Here, take the keys. I haven't a day to waste."

"You trust me with your car?"

"Can't you drive a stick shift?"

"Of course!"

"Run along, then. You might speak to Mansfield while you're there. I'm sure we can't just collect Martha without anyone's by-your-leave. Ask him to attend to the formalities, and to arrange with the owner of the sensitive hearse to bring her as far as Ransom's Bridge. We'll want a sunny day, so I'd like three possible dates, the sooner the better. Pentacost has the grave nearly deep enough now." I was disconcerted by his frankness, as he was quick to see. "Does it distress you to take such a message? Would you rather I did?" I shook my head. "While you're at it, you might as well get a mailbox. Henry's was riddled with bullet holes, so I took it down." He hesitated. "Why don't you lunch at the Inn? My treat, of course."

"That's hardly necessary," I said stiffly.

"Damn it, do I have to lose a day and go with you in order for you to eat?" He reached for his wallet.

"I'm not a pauper!" Then, embarrassed by my own ungraciousness, I stammered, "However, I'd like your f-formal permission to get a f-few additional groceries. We don't have any tea, or yeast, or molasses—"

"Get whatever you like. I'm sure I can trust you to be frugal." His tone could not have been more impersonal. "If it offends you for me to offer you money—and I can see that it does—then keep a careful account so I can reimburse you. We're low on candles and lamp oil—take the can, will you? And since you are running errands for me, I see no reason why you should have any scruples

about letting me, *in absentia*, take you to lunch. I insist, and shall be offended if you refuse."

No doubt it was the recollection of this exchange which caused me to flush painfully when Dixon Mansfield remarked, "I'm fully in sympathy with your desire to move Martha to Tamarack, Emelie, but I can't help feeling it may not be too wise to find yourself too obligated to—ah—to a man like Justin St. John."

"Why, whatever do you mean? He said it was instead of flowers! And he said—well, he implied—it wouldn't cost too much. They're borrowing the oxen—"

"I wasn't thinking in terms of the actual sum he would be out of pocket," Mr. Mansfield said dryly. "Although it would no doubt buy quite a spectacular floral piece! It's merely that St. John strikes me as a man who is not quite a gentleman, one who would—who might—push an advantage. Perhaps I wrong him."

As I parked by the builders' supply, I was still mulling over Dixon Mansfield's remarks. Had he been Merrill's attorney when she got her divorce? And therefore knew something to St. John's discredit? Whatever it was, it was none of *my* business, and I didn't think better of Mansfield for having suggested—suggested what? "*Don't be obligated*—" What would he say if he knew St. John was providing the very food I ate? Perhaps it *was* improper—no doubt it was—but St. John made it seem so normal and sensible I couldn't object without appearing a perfect fool. Wasn't it part of being a 'gentleman' to enable someone to accept a favor without loss of face? Well, then . . .

The builders' supply, I discovered, had been put to the trouble by Henry, eight years before, of locating some of the slate used to roof Tamarack—a rare shade, a pale gray-green, which came only from one quarry, somewhere beyond Fair Haven. They had laid in three squares at a cost of \$110 each, and he had then changed his mind, and the slate had been taking up space in their warehouse ever since. I'd be well advised to take all three squares, they said, as they didn't know if that quarry was still being worked. They wouldn't ask today's price—they'd be satisfied to break even at (say) \$160 a square. As for roofers, yes, they could recommend a team—a master roofer and his helper—but they couldn't say what he

charged. Probably around thirty dollars an hour—that would be for the two of them. Of course it might be more. Probably was.

Staggered by the necessity of spending a lot of money I didn't have, I longed to solace myself with lunch in quiet and elegant surroundings, but of course I could not eat at the Inn on St. John's bounty. At this critical moment I heard Merrill call my name.

"Emelie, my sweet!" She was eye-catching in immaculate gabardine and a quantity of gold chains and bracelets. "*Do* have lunch with me—come, we must have a good chat!"

"Thanks, but I can't possibly!" To soften this abrupt refusal, I added, "I've time for a quick cup of coffee in the café, if you like," hoping she would *not* like. A chat with Merrill was the last thing I felt up to facing.

As if on cue, "Darling, thank you, but no!" Merrill cried. "I was going to use the luncheon to *bribe* you—I want *so much* to see Tamarack again! After all, I spent the only happy days of my childhood there! *Will* you let me come, if only for an hour?"

"Of course!" I didn't see how I could say anything else.

"How sweet of you! It's so *boring* here, isn't it? Can you imagine living all your life in Welkin? I'm waiting and *waiting* for Dixon to let me have my few things from the River House. *Why* it's taking him so long I cannot think!"

"The appraisers have to come first," I said. "Perhaps they're busy, too—"

"Oh, I *forgot* you're in a tearing hurry," she said, as if I'd been hinting. "I suppose Justin wants his car back on the dot—*so* like him! And here I chatter on and on!"

So she recognized the car. Did they meet now and then? No, not if it was an unfriendly old-fashioned divorce. Then when had she seen it? Perhaps at the funeral, if she were watching for him then. It must be terrible to fall out of love with a man, I thought—or have him drive you out of love with him—and still not be really free of him . . .

As luck would have it, I pulled into the supermarket parking lot just as Gordon Fenwick was easing himself out of his battered VW.

"Why Emelie! How's every little thing at Tamarack?"

He eyed the Audi with open envy. "How's that baby on the hills come winter?"

"I have no idea," I said shortly. "It's not mine."

"A hot car, eh?" he said, and gave a gust of laughter.

I strode into the store, but I could not seem to shake him. We passed and repassed in the aisles, and each time he greeted me with some sickening cliché. "Ships that pass in the night!" he cried once, and, "Long time no see!" another. And then, to my intense annoyance, there he was, right behind me at the check-out line. I had to peel off a bill from my rapidly shrinking roll of ten's, and although I tried to do this discreetly, Gordon Fenwick's eyes, I knew, had seen, and conveyed to his avid brain the message that this, too, was not mine, but borrowed. Or given.

"St. John decided to stay longer?" he said, in an obvious *sequitur*, I thought, enraged.

I said coldly, "Not at Tamarack, I assure you, once his lease runs out."

I had just stowed my sack in the car when for the third time I heard myself hailed. "Mrs. Milne!" It was Vale Whittaker. "Did you find a place? I've worried about you!"

I said with a smile, "I'm at Tamarack—I'm living there."

"I heard your grandaunt left it to you—how thrilling! But I thought that devastating man was renting it?"

"He is." I felt the color flood my face, and added lamely, "He's boarding, actually."

"What a sensible solution!" Mrs. Whittaker said kindly.

As I drove out of town, I reflected that almost everyone in Welkin must now be aware of my unconventional living arrangement. Well, what of it? What was there to hide? Nothing. Then why did I mind? I didn't Mrs. Whittaker, or even Dixon Mansfield. It was Gordon and Merrill that bothered me. The one would assume I was living off St. John, the other that I was living with him, and I could not disclaim either idea without lending it substance.

By the time I lugged the sack of groceries into the kitchen I was in a touchy mood, being (among other things) extremely hungry.

St. John glanced up from his easel and frowned. "What did you carry that up for?"

"It wasn't heavy." I began to sort out my purchases.

"How was your lunch?"

"I didn't bother with any. I didn't feel like eating."

He laid down his brush. "Did you do anything I asked? Get the lamp oil? Candles? Keep a list of what you spent?"

"Certainly." I fished the paper from my purse. "I also saw Mr. Mansfield, conferred about the roof, and ran into Vale Whittaker, Gordon, and Merrill—in reverse order."

"Merrill's still here? Why the *hell* can't she have the decency to clear out?"

"She's waiting for her furniture from the River House."

"A likely tale! She only came because she was hoping Tamarack would drop into her lap like a ripe plum. God, how she must resent you! Did she say something particularly nasty, robbing you of all appetite?"

"As a matter of fact, she was quite friendly. She invited me to lunch at the Inn."

"And you, dreading the safety of your immortal soul, refused?"

I had to laugh. Really, he was overdoing it! "I hope you aren't offended, Mr. St. John," I said sweetly, "but I didn't feel like lunching with Merrill Mansfield St. John Broome."

He shrugged. "Why should that offend me?" Then, with one of his lightning changes of mood: "Fix yourself a sandwich, for the love of God; you look gaunt. Did you locate a roofer?"

As I ate, I told him about the slate, and the price Henry didn't pay and what I now would have to, and the price of labor. All in all it was one of my usual dirges, of which he must be getting heartily sick, I thought.

"What exactly is a square?"

"Enough to cover one hundred square feet. That's not very much, obviously—ten by ten. But the great thing about slate is, you don't have to replace everything, only what's damaged. Maybe I wouldn't need more than the one square."

"If you take a good look at that roof, you'll take all three."

I shook my head. "They want cash on delivery. I can

manage one square, or half a day's labor for two men, but not both."

"Mrs. Milne, October is frequently a rainy month. I suggest you allow me to advance whatever is needed to purchase three squares of slate, and to have same installed on the roof of this domicile. Water in the soup should never be added involuntarily—"

"No, thanks," I said.

"Don't be stubborn. You'll be hearing from Mansfield before I leave and can repay me then. This is the last month, Madam Landlady, when you can count on the roof being clear of snow and available for repair, and we're a week into October already."

"I may not get one dime. What if I couldn't pay you back?"

"I promise I wouldn't demand a pound of flesh," he smiled.

"No, I couldn't! I can't! Never mind why!"

"My God, I wish you'd eat regularly, you'd be easier to deal with. You act as if I'm making you an improper proposal. I am simply suggesting you let me act as your banker. A loan is a loan is a loan. However, I balk at charging interest—between friends or family that's usury, and one of the few sins I'm too fastidious to commit." He smiled at me again, and I thought how it changed his face . . . warmed his eyes and softened his mouth. "So give me one good reason why you can't accept."

"You aren't a banker, that's why."

The smile faded. "And you are neither friend nor family, is that it? As you wish. How much money have you left?"

"One hundred and seventy dollars," I said with sickening docility.

He stood up. "Get your damned single square and I'll dicker with Pentacost. His ancestors put that roof on this house and he might as well learn how to patch it. In any case he'll come cheaper than your fancy dans from Welkin."

He strolled back to his easel and picked up his brush, while I, *Madam Landlady*, cleared the table and put away the groceries.

Gam was to come home one week later, in the late af-

ternoon of Monday, the fifteenth of October. It had rained during the night, and was still raining in the morning, a steady, quiet weeping that wore on my nerves. St. John promised it would clear by noon; there was no reason we couldn't proceed with our plans, he said, for by the time we'd be setting out through the woods it would be five o'clock and the foliage would be nearly dry; boots might be advisable but no doubt I had a pair? I said I had. I said he was no more anxious than I to get this over with, and I stared out at the rain and asked for the tenth time if he was *sure* it would stop?

"I swear it," he said from where he was at work at his easel. "Stop fretting and do something useful. It's the best way I know to get through a bad day."

I didn't need him to tell me that. I took the kettle of hot water and fixed myself a scrubbing pail and went to work washing the paneling of the main house south parlors—it had to be done in any case; all the painted woodwork of the house needed washing—but I knew that for some reason it irritated him when I did this kind of work. Perhaps the constant tramping back and forth for fresh water got on his nerves; but he was the one who had made such a point of it that he didn't need quiet when he worked, and I was anxious to get this task done before cold weather.

At noon the rain stopped; by one o'clock the sun was shining; by three, when we set out for Welkin, a fresh breeze was drying the maples. We went in the short way, over the east road, I in my black dress and good black coat, thin plastic boots over my best shoes, St. John once again in the dark broadcloth, white shirt, black silk tie of the proper funeral-goer, his arrogant profile more incongruous than ever over the excessive urbanity of his garb . . . except for his boots, which, though black and highly polished, did not look as if they were intended for city streets. I feel unreal and he looks unreal, I was thinking, when he flicked me a questioning glance, and I at once gazed straight ahead.

"Are you all right, Emelie?" he said in the voice he used for Pentacost.

"Yes, thank you, Mr. St. John," I said faintly, and stared at the road as if I had never seen it before. The blacktop gleamed like pewter double-striped with gold,

the trees overhead a shower of golden coins. It was interesting how the road kept changing according to the light: now well-buffed silver, now tarnished, now rough-hammered; now polished steel, now copper-plated . . .

And then we were there, and Dixon Mansfield greeted us, and some official of the cemetery, too—the warden or trustee or something—and I signed papers in triplicate. And then I was walking across the neatly raked grass to where Gam's coffin, already raised, stood mutely waiting. As I turned to follow it to the hearse, St. John reached to take my hand—did he think I might trip over an invisible maple root?—but I had had a week of being Mrs. Blaikson/Madam Landlady, and I pulled my hand free.

We returned by way of Ransom's Bridge, an abbreviated procession of two vehicles, Mr. Bennett and I in the hearse with Gam, St. John with Bennett's two assistants immediately behind. I had asked Dixon Mansfield not to come, and he seemed relieved. As for the minister, I didn't think we needed one; it seemed to me burials are like baptisms: if it's done right once, it's forever.

In front of the store, gawked at by a cluster of round-eyed, silent children, stood a pair of oxen, their polished horns tipped with golden balls, their dark coats gleaming, their harness oiled, their tails braided. Once the coffin had been eased onto the stone boat—a stout affair of heavy planks assembled roughly like a child's sled—the oxen moved off as smoothly as if they fully understood the need for solemn observance of all the decencies.

Pentacost was there, and an unshaven fellow who appeared to be the owner of the stone boat, and Deese Ransom himself, a large and loose-jointed man in a pair of baggy green pants held up by one suspender, a torn cardigan over a gray sweatshirt, and a luminous red cap, under which his sag-jowled face was as sad as a conscientious hound's. When the children moved to follow us, he addressed them with one word: "Git!"—and they got.

Once across the bridge, we set out into what appeared at first to be trackless forest. I soon saw we were on an old lumbering trail; it was wide enough for the stone boat, with Deese Ransom to one side plodding as tirelessly as his team. Directly in front of me was the coffin, immaculate and gleaming—someone must have washed it, I thought lucidly. Here in the forest the leaves still dripped,

and it was strangely unquiet. The soft yet heavy thudding of the oxen's hoofs, the occasional sharp ring of metal on stone, the rasping scrape of wooden runners over bare rock—all sounded inordinately loud to me. The noise of our feet, disturbing the leaves, snapping dead twigs, sliding on the wet ground, the noise of our breathing, especially the labored inhalations of Mr. Bennett, bringing up the rear, seemed blatant, an insensitive boast that we, at least, were still alive. "It's not far this way, Mrs. Milne," St. John said in a low voice. "Less than a mile altogether." I did not reply, but kept my attention focused on Pentacost, who, now beside the casket, now behind it, kept giving it little pats and strokes, as if to soothe a frightened child.

We reached the graveyard just before sunset. In the lingering golden light everything seemed unreal: the faces of the men, the mound of earth, the heavy, absurdly handsome box. What had to be done was done swiftly: coffin shifted onto straps, slid onto planks placed across the gaping hole, planks knocked aside while slowly, slowly, straining against the weight, they lowered Gam (light as a sparrow) into her right and proper grave.

St. John stood on my left, staring expressionlessly before him, as formal and correct as an ambassador at the burial of a queen. Neither of us moved as the others withdrew. When there was nothing to be heard but the stirrings of the forest, I stepped forward and scooped up some earth in my bare hands and for the last time let fall onto the coffin of someone I loved that symbol of Go-with-God.

At that moment a piercing whistle behind me made me jump, and I whirled to see Pentacost, his hands to his mouth, give another shrill blast. "There he goes—oh, the beauty!" he cried exultantly. "Ten pointer, easy! Lord, lord, I hope he don't show hisself to that sack o' suet Deese Ransom! Never you mind, Emmy—" for I hadn't been quick enough to see the deer—"there's a regular parade right past here any day at dawn or sunset—like the changin' of the guard," he added with a chuckle. "Somebody oughta muster 'em out before bow season, eh, Justin?"

"Are you going to post your land, Mrs. Milne?"

"I don't know—what does that involve?"

"You put up No Hunting signs every five hundred feet or so."

"Not just along the road but all along the property line? That would take a lot of signs. I'm not sure I could afford it."

"I hate to see land posted," St. John said. "I can't say I'd blame you, though, if you did—a woman alone probably doesn't want a swarm of hunters loose on her property."

"If Emmy stays indoors she'll be safe enough," Pentacost said. "It's these damned fools who don't know the back end of a gun from the business end you have to look out for. Come chargin' into the woods boozin' it up till they can't tell a cow from a coon dog."

"I wasn't thinking so much of gun season as next week when the bow hunters will be about," St. John said.

"She'll be safe enough if she keeps to the open. If you're thinkin' there's a powerful lot of evil-minded folk in the world, on the prowl for a likely female—" Pentacost gave me an appraising stare—"I kin see ye've got reason to worry. But won't ye still be about, Justin?"

I could see which way this conversation was headed: plant the idea I needed protection right through gun season, and I'd be begging St. John to stay until Thanksgiving. I smiled. "Really you needn't either of you worry. I'm not nervous alone in the country, and since I have to live here I'd better begin the way I mean to continue, don't you agree?"

"They brought the roofing slate on Thursday," St. John remarked. "If you hope to finish before you freeze to your hammer, Pentacost, you'd better be at it."

"You're worse'n a woman for naggin'."

"A barrel of cider when you're done," St. John grinned.

"I'll be there tomorrer mornin'," Pentacost said, and picked up his spade. "Now I got to tuck Martha in. By the by, Emmy—I cleared away them shad bushes from behind your stone so ye kin read that poem yore boy had put there—mighty pretty poem," he added with a gentle smile. "He shorely thought a powerful lot of you."

I stared at Pentacost for the space of several heartbeats. Then, without a word, I went over to Emelie Stark's grave.

The rear of the stone was so stained with lichen and thick with moss I could hardly make out the words.

"*Here lies my gentle mother,*" St. John read slowly, "*Whose—*" He hesitated.

"Fate," I suggested.

"*Whose fate my father drew—that doesn't make sense.*"

"Could it be 'knew'?" I said. "*Whose fate my father knew?*"

"Perhaps. Yes, that's possible." He caught up a stone and scraped away the encroaching moss. "*My life bought with her honour, Her soul to Heav'n flew. While God love's sins shall pardon, My Blood to hers be True.*"

In the silence, the spadefuls of soil rattled noisily on Gam's roof.

"What does it mean?" . . . Though I thought I knew.

"Another Carson son hating his father," St. John shrugged. He picked up a scythe half buried in the prunings. "Where's your axe, Pentacost?"

"Put away where it belongs."

"I'll put this with it, then. Good night, Pentacost Jones."

"I bid ye good night, Justin." He straightened, to watch us make our way toward the gate. "Emmy," he called softly, "ain't ye goin' to say good night to Miss Martha?"

I turned and said through trembling lips, "Good night, Gam."

He nodded, satisfied, and began to shovel the earth again.

Once we were in the lane, I wanted to hurry; I was afraid the dark would catch us before we were home. "Wait here," St. John said, and disappeared with the scythe behind the great bush of lilac. I could hear the clink of metal on rock and then a creaking like a rusty hinge; when he reappeared, he was empty-handed.

"What's back there?" I said. "The family crypt?" I was so relieved at the notion I could have laughed aloud: it was a far more tactful location than right beneath the Hogarth room windows!

"No doubt it's been used that way on occasion. At the moment Pentacost finds it a good place to stash his tools."

By the time we reached the lake, the moon, round as a golden ducat, had climbed over the hill to the east and

was doubling its wealth in the still waters. Tamarack hung like a shadow against the sky.

"How could you see it first from down here?" I had paused as if to admire the afterglow picking out the pattern of the windows, and now I surreptitiously bent and stretched one foot to ease a sudden cramp. What an idiot, to wear shoes with heels . . . "Did you come up the trail we took today?"

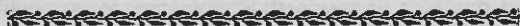
"Yes—it's the shortest way in from Ransom's Bridge. I was curious to see what kind of house would tempt Merrill to commit the public vulgarity of going to court." His voice was as flat and impersonal as Pentacost's spade. "Grasping she might be, as well I knew, but she'd kept her greed hidden; it was a private vice she revealed only to her husband, whose opinion by now she considered beneath her notice."

For the first time I felt a sneaking sympathy for Merrill. An angel in heaven could hardly meet his standards, I thought; of course *we women* must never be blemished with the faintest tinge of acquisitiveness! It's not *fair*, I thought, looking up at Tamarack, and I said as much.

"I don't think you're being fair!" I said spiritedly. "To a man, a house like Tamarack is nothing more than a—a status symbol, proof of the money he's earned, of the comforts he can afford—a sign of the respect with which he's treated because of his achievements or his brains or just his position, if he's born to it, I mean. To a woman—to Merrill or to me—it's the—the personification of all our female nature yearns for!" I was astonished and proud to hear myself speak so fluently and passionately about something that really mattered to me; usually—at least with Bard—if I deeply cared what I was talking about, I grew tongue-tied. "Whatever she did to try to get Tamarack, whatever I do to keep it, remember, we can't help ourselves, so if we sometimes forget to be genteel and ladylike, you ought to try to overlook it!" I could feel his eyes on my face, and I commenced to stammer. "It would be a—an unnatural female who c-could subdue her nesting instinct so she did not l-lust after such a house as Tamarack or—or try her *damndest* to possess it!"

"Very enlightening and instructive," he remarked. "Watch your step, it grows swampy here."

Chapter Sixteen



I had begun to hope that Merrill had forgotten about visiting Tamarack, but the very next day after Gam's homecoming, there she was. I had gone into the kitchen to get fresh rinse water when I heard the sound of a car. St. John, at his easel, looked out the window and said something under his breath, *Merrill* or *merde*, I wasn't sure which. Her red roadster was churning directly across the neglected lawn toward the north door.

"What the goddamn hell is *she* doing here?"

I was stripping off my apron. "I invited her."

"Did you now? In that case I feel no compunction at leaving you to her tender mercies. Holler for Pentacost if she starts to suck your blood."

I smoothed my hair with my hands and went to greet her.

"Emelie, my sweet!" She pecked the air by my cheek. "So *kind* of you to let me come!" Sailing in past me, she looked about her with the air of a committee. "But you're so *brave*! Drudging away to wash all these *acres* of walls, and no one to help! From what Dixon tells me, Martha must have left her affairs in rather a muddle—isn't it going to be difficult for you to cope?"

She raised her exquisite brows and waited, I suppose, for me to pour out my girlish heart. I said nothing.

"I rather thought Martha would leave me *at least* the River House. I suppose she must have pitied that wet-rag of a wife of Gordon's—though Nora's state of health is *all* her own fault. She's one of those *boring* women who are forever miscarrying—you know the type—and in Nora's case it was utterly pointless, no need *at all* to keep Gordon on leash that way—everybody *knows* who holds the purse strings in that *ménage*!"

We were on the terrace by now, and I wondered what

Pentacost, astraddle the peak of the roof, must make of this incredible Niagara of malicious indiscretions.

"But it leaves me *quite* without a summer place here in the mountains," she went on with an air of martyrdom. "Who can *endure* Boston in the summer?"

I said, "What are you suggesting, Mrs. Broome?" and followed her helplessly into the kitchen. It was empty.

She was looking about her as if determined nothing she saw would shake her poise. "You must call me Merrill," she said graciously. "After all, we're cousins!" There was an infinitesimal pause. "I thought I might rent Tamarack."

Rent Tamarack! It hadn't occurred to me . . . "You mean for next summer? I don't know—I'd have to be here, to—to look after things—"

"Oh, dear no, *not* just for the summer! I would want a five-year lease at least! It needs a *great* deal done to make it livable, and darling Emelie, your taste isn't *quite* mine, is it?" She averted her eyes from my faithful jeans. "But I'd hire the decorators—I'd not let you be burdened with decisions day after day until you're ready to scream!"

"Mrs. Broome—Merrill—I'm afraid what you suggest is impossible. I have to live here at least half the year—"

She pounced. "You mean the Will requires you to? But how can you make a living, way off here?"

I admitted it was a problem.

"I *knew* my proposal would be a godsend! But I'm not entirely selfless, I admit!" She laughed lightly. "It is more than possible that Tamarack may one day be mine, if it should turn out that all your spunk and determination, Emelie dear, simply weren't enough. It would be such a shame if you'd done a lot of decorating I'd just have to do over. What do you say to five thousand? Payable in advance, of course." She opened her checkbook. "How *lucky* it's a large enough house so you can come whenever you're required to, and you won't inconvenience me in the least—why, you can have a whole wing to yourself!"

"Mrs. Broome, will you please stop!" I was watching with sick fascination as she inscribed *One Year's Rent of Tamarack* in the corner of the check. "I—I'm not at all sure I want to rent Tamarack to anyone, and if I did, I'd have to ask more than five thousand dollars—I know that

sounds exorbitant but it would barely cover the taxes and insurance—I have to pay for all the repairs, too, you see—”

It occurred to me I was being indiscreet. At the same time I wondered if I were telling her anything she didn't know.

“Ten thousand, then?” she said, as if the difference weren't worth the quibbling, and wrote *Emily Carson Milne \$10,000.00* before I could stop her.

“*E-l-i-e*,” I said. Ten thousand dollars! Ten thousand *every year!* I needn't dread the escalation of taxes . . . I could repair and restore to perfection . . . I could even put aside a sum for later, when Tamarack was mine absolutely. “I—uh—may I think it over?” I was stammering, when she smiled. So might a cat smile who sees the bird hop nearer, I thought, and said with belated caution, “I'd have to ask Mr. Mansfield if it's legal—I mean, does it conflict with Gam's instructions, you know. And of course I'd have to know what your decorators are planning to do.”

“Of course,” she agreed, still smiling. “Come—let's walk through the house and I'll tell you what would *transform* it utterly!” She put the check on the trestle table as casually as if it were a five dollar bill, and leading the way along the terrace, graciously waved me in ahead of her through the garden door. “Each of the parlors should be in a different color scheme, don't you agree? Now this one, which gets so much sun, might be in cool shades of violet, and the furniture in silver—”

“You mean the upholstery?” I struggled to visualize such an exotic transformation of the plain and somewhat masculine room.

“No, no!” she said impatiently. “I said the *furniture*—whatever you would gild if you weren't doing it in argent! Louis Quinze, obviously. And over here—” she gestured to the room on our left—“celandine, with my Flytraps in the Goddard secretary against the far wall. Now *this* one—” she swept me along the hall—“could be cream and rose, fragile, you know, with a great velvet pouf in the center. And across the hall—copper, I think, with steel furniture. German Bauhaus, if I can find it. Somehow one must overcome the crushing *boredom* of these rooms, so *appallingly* alike!”

It crossed my mind that I was the victim of an elaborate practical joke. Had she and St. John conspired to hoax me, and later they'd have a great laugh over how she had horrified me? I didn't think so—his flight had seemed genuine enough—but she *couldn't* be serious, I thought, as, zombielike, I followed her upstairs and heard the master bedrooms transmogrified into Viennese Empire (shirred chiffon window shades) and Early Hollywood (everything lacquered shiny white, including the floorboards, with a quantity of white bearskins for 'contrast in texture').

"The most *delightful* part of having a spacious house, Emelie," she told me, "is to be able to have a *different* room for every mood. But the east wing wouldn't do for you, it's too cut up—much better for the servants, I think. There's a very *spacious* room that would make a splendid bed-sitting room over the kitchen. Does it still have that dreadful wallpaper? My cook will need the kitchen and pantry, but we can work that out." She gave me a generous smile.

This can't be real, I thought. I can't be walking around calmly planning the—the selling of Tamarack's soul. . . . But I *have* to do something, or Merrill will have Tamarack no matter what. At least this way I'd still be here: the house wouldn't be entirely defenseless.

We went back onto the terrace. "How your heart must *ache* to see Tamarack so shabby!" she sighed, gazing up at the brick. "White, I think, or perhaps *palest* cream, and the shutters a deep gray." She shaded her eyes with her hand. "Have you got the roofers working already? Splendid!"

"Ye knows who's up here, Miss Highfalutin!" came the outraged voice of Pentacost Jones. "Or have ye took to fergittin' yer old friends, now that ye're shuckin' off husbands like a corn popper?"

"Why, Pentacost! It's been years, but you haven't changed a bit!" To me she said in a low voice, "He used to work for my grandfather. Strange little fellow, but rather sweet."

"Well, ye've changed, and that's a fact!" Pentacost was perched on the top of his ladder like an angry squirrel. "What ye've gained in looks ye've lost in manners. Worked fer yer grandfather, did I? I never did a day's

work for that Friday-faced skinflint in my whole life! I worked fer Miz Fenwick—Miz 'Toinette that was—and fer yore mother, whose gentle tongue ye *don't* have, Miz Snooty Face, nor her lovin' heart neither!"

"What a delightful view!" Merrill gazed toward the lake with exaggerated tact, as if Pentacost were a rowdy uncle of mine whose behavior I must find mortifying. "He was always impossibly impudent!" she added under her breath. "I wonder you can bear to have him about!"

"I like him," I said, "and he tolerates me because he's a friend of St. John's."

"St. John!" she mimicked, and gave her tinkling laugh. "How formal! What does he call you?"

"Madam Landlady," I replied expressionlessly.

She made a charming *moue*. "Darling Emelie, one simply has to put up with him as he is—if one can." She shrugged. "I remember when I was a child wading past all those nasty clutching weeds. *Naturally* my grandfather refused to have the lake dredged near the shore, but I certainly shall! Then I'll have a terrace laid. Colorful lounge chairs, little tables scattered here and there—can't you picture it? Of course in June there are those *ghastly* black flies, and all summer the mosquitoes, but one can always have the whole area sprayed with something really potent—"

If this was a joke I had had all I could stand. If she was serious—well, it was bad enough to let her chatter on about velvet poufs and smothered brick; it was monstrous to listen in silence to plans to ruin the lake and evict the heron. I fled to the kitchen and snatched up the check. Returning, I said with what dignity I had left, "On second thought I'm sure such an arrangement as you suggest would never work out! Whatever is done here has to be according to *my* taste, and as you yourself said, mine is not yours!" I held out the check.

She chose to misunderstand me. "No, no, you keep it, and go talk to Dixon. You may assure him that if ever I'm about to do something you don't like, you have only to say so! After all, it's *your* house—"

"So it must remain! Mine in every way!" I'd been more or less propelling her along the hallway to the north door, and as we came out on the step, in some desperation I went on: "You see, I just *can't* share my house—"

St. John, his face like cast bronze, stood by the red roadster, holding open the door to the driver's seat.

"Oh, is that another of Martha's stipulations?" she cooed. I shook my head. "I see—it's just that you can't share your house with a woman. I daresay that's very natural!" She strolled toward the car as if she were hostess here. "How *nice* to see you, Justin!" she said warmly. "And how lovely for you Emelie's so hospitable! Are you staying long?"

"Get in," he said, "and don't come back."

"Why, Justin!" she laughed up at him. "Your manners are no better, are they? When I *think* how I struggled to make you less the country bumpkin—"

"Mrs. Broome," I said, "*please*—take your check!"

"Oh, dear," she sighed, "Justin, you really ought to use your influence with Emelie—she's being very foolish! Turning down ten thousand a year, plus the west wing all to herself—"

"The west wing?" St. John said, and showed his teeth. "She couldn't sleep there alone—it's haunted."

"Oh, is that why you've been welcome to stay? How clever of you!" She gave me her triangular smile. "Don't you know better than to believe whatever Justin chooses to tell you? Perhaps he didn't mention he grew up in the backwoods—although I marvel you didn't guess it! I assure you he has the most *extraordinary* skill at laying traps and snares!"

"I don't for a moment believe Tamarack is haunted, Mrs. Broome," I said regally, "and furthermore Mr. St. John and I have a purely business arrangement—"

"Who has suggested it is anything else?" she purred. "And since you have such an excellent head for business, Emelie, you must see you can't possibly do better than my offer!"

"But she can, you know," St. John remarked. "Mrs. Milne can always rent to me. I'd give her *carte blanche* and the full run of the house."

"How very very generous of you, Justin! Be *sure* she consults Dixon to see if such an arrangement is legal, for I assure you *I* most certainly shall!"

She shot off the way she had come, leaves and sod spitting out behind her wheels as she spun recklessly down the slope.

I turned on him. "Now you've done it! There goes the last shred of my reputation!"

"I've said something to offend?"

"Don't pretend you don't know the meaning of that phrase!"

"Run of the house?" he ventured, as if truly puzzled.

"*Carte blanche*!" I stammered, tears of fury in my eyes.

He was innocence itself. "Doesn't it mean 'a free hand'?"

I stalked into the house. The wall I'd been washing had dried in streaks and would need to be soaked, and even then might not come entirely clean. Savagely I began to sponge it. Of course it was possible he *didn't* know—probably he never read any Regency novels—but everybody knows what '*carte blanche*' from a man to a woman means, I fumed. How *dare* he humiliate me so, and in front of Merrill! Even if it was just a—a jab at her, he had no right! Or did he think . . . was he really suggesting . . .

"You don't ask why I came back before you were rid of her," he remarked, leaning against the doorjamb and watching me critically as I worked. "If you start at the bottom and work up there's less streaking."

"All right, why did you?" I snapped.

"I found a letter for you in the mailbox. From the look of it I thought it might be your anticipated accounting."

I sat back on my heels and stared at him. "What did you do—hold it to the light?"

For a moment he didn't move. Then he straightened, and with a gesture that need not have been much different, I thought, had he been unsheathing a sword, he withdrew a long white envelope from an inside pocket of his jacket. "The return address reads Dixon Mansfield, Attorney at Law." He smiled thinly. "You can really be offensive when you try, can't you, Madam Landlady?"

"So can you," I replied, "and apparently without trying!"

We stared at each other, and I felt sick. Dear God, what had possessed me to speak him like that?

He said, "I apologize for the *carte blanche*."

"And I apologize for my sh-shocking suggestion," I said huskily.

"You had half an hour of Merrill's company," he shrugged. "That should excuse anything short of murder." I was holding the envelope as if it burnt my fingers. "Go on, read it. I have to see how Pentacost is doing."

I took Dixon Mansfield's letter into the kitchen and spread its pages on the trestle table. It was quite detailed, and I've never been very clever about money, but even I had no difficulty in comprehending the final paragraph, which stated with brutal clarity that if all the remaining investments of Martha Stark Carson were sold at the prices quoted on the Exchange on the eleventh of this month (see listing #1, above), and all the known debts outstanding on the date of her death and chargeable to the Estate (list #2) were paid and the bequests were met (list #3), there would remain a residue in the Estate of six hundred and forty-five dollars. Beneath this was Dixon Mansfield's signature, followed by a handwritten note to the effect that "a final appraisal of the furnishings of both houses is scheduled for November 10th. Release of furniture to the heirs is possible after that date."

I straightened the pages with trembling fingers. The property tax was not included in that List #2. What had Mr. Mansfield said it would be this year? Thirty-seven hundred, due and payable in two weeks. Thirty-seven hundred minus six hundred . . . Well, had I really expected any other ending to this fairy tale?

"Bad news, Mrs. Milne?"

With an attempt at lightness I was far from feeling, I said, "I could have bought all three squares of slate after all. There'll be six hundred and forty-five dollars left when everything is paid up. A month ago I would have thought that a lot of money."

"You're in the black, then?"

I shook my head. "Not quite. There's a thirty-seven hundred dollar property tax due at the end of the month." I tried to smile. "I should have taken Merrill up on her offer. I wouldn't have liked having her here, but at least I could have stayed."

"Don't you believe it. If I know Merrill—and I do know Merrill—she had no intention whatsoever of paying out ten thousand a year so you could keep Tamarack. I suspect she was playing with you, dangling a tempting

sum like that within your reach, only to withdraw it, regretfully, of course, when on second thought, et cetera et cetera. Or—assuming she wanted to prolong the jest—she'd move in, and then move out again in a couple of weeks, and God help you if you'd already spent the rent." He shrugged. "She warned you against me. I return the compliment. I think it is a safe assumption her every move is designed to oust you from here and to install herself in your stead."

What could I say? Of course Merrill's offer had never been genuine. I'd only listened because I was seduced by my longing for Tamarack into a gullibility bordering on idiocy.

"You have just escaped demonstrating the old saw, 'Out of the frying pan into the fire,' " he remarked agreeably. "Now I suggest you let me take the pan off the heat—"

"Oh no!" I said.

"Do hear me out. What you really need, of course, is—ah—a rich husband, an indulgent fellow who would let you have your way in everything and confine his own activities to signing the checks. *However*," he continued, avuncular solicitude nicely blended with judicial caution that was pure Dixon Mansfield, "since I do not know any—ah—likely candidate for this thankless role, and I presume you do not either, I suggest you come to your senses—" he was now speaking in his own habitual voice, a barely-held-in-check irritation at what he seemed to consider willful stupidity—"and let me lend you whatever you need for that damned property tax you say isn't paid. You needn't worry that I'll use the loan as a lever to make you let me stay—"

"Mr. St. John," I cut in firmly, "once and for all understand that I *cannot* borrow money from you under any circumstance you can devise! If Merrill is determined to have Tamarack—and I agree she is—she would find out somehow where I got the money, and she would say it wasn't mine because I hadn't earned it—"

"Oh, she wouldn't say *that*!" he said. Then he grinned. "It's your fault—I wouldn't tease you if you didn't blush. Don't you know it isn't done any more? But you're right, it would give her a weapon. Forget the loan, I've a better idea. I'll take an option on a few acres somewhere on

the edge of the property, it doesn't matter where. Then when you get full title—*now* what's the matter?"

"The Will forbids any sort of subdividing."

He stared at me thoughtfully. I could hear Pentacost on the roof, and wok wok WOK WOK! as he drove another nail in.

"Very well," St. John said at last, "I'll be your long-term renter instead of Merrill. You give me a lease for however long you like—one year, two, five—which rents me the land of Tamarack, not the house, for the purpose of botanical research and study. How's that? You have the house entirely to yourself—no possibility of scandal, you see. I'm not going to offer you anything like Merrill's ludicrous and/or chimerical ten thousand—*will* you let me finish, damn it!—I was thinking of one thousand a year for a five-year lease, the whole payable in advance. This would get you off the hook for this year's taxes, and who knows what will happen before the next fall due—"

"I simply will not listen to any more!" I cried. "A clearer proposal of outright charity I never heard! One thousand dollars year for the privilege of walking on Tamarack's land, when *anybody* can walk all over it now—and they *do*, for all I know! *Nobody* would accept such an arrangement as a bona fide rental!"

"All right, throw in my room in the east wing, and I'll double my offer."

"Oh, very nice!" I said, when I had caught my breath. "Very neatly done, Mr. St. John! That's what you were aiming at all along, weren't you? To stay here after November first! Well, you *aren't* going to stay, no matter how you plot and plan!"

We were facing each other across the trestle table like opposing armies.

"You little fool," he said, his patience gone at last, "supposing you do get over the hurdle of those eternal taxes—how are you doing to manage to live here? How far do you think that six hundred will stretch?"

"I'll get a job!"

"Doing what? This house won't be cheap to run—how do you propose to make enough to cover the upkeep?"

"What upkeep?" I said rashly. "If you can camp in the kitchen, so can I! All I'll need is wood for the stove, and I can get that for myself! The only difficulty I can see

is how I'll get to work every day, but surely I can arrange—"

He reached across the table and caught my wrist. Turning my hand over, he traced across my palm with his thumb, and along my fingers. I felt a shiver run under my skin.

"No calluses," he said, as if it amused him. "Have you ever seen a woman's hand who cuts her own firewood? I have. You won't like the changes living here alone will make in you, my dear Mrs. Milne."

Because I didn't like his tone, or the things he said, or the familiar way he felt my hand (or the odd and shaky feeling it gave me), I said coldly, "So I'll wear gloves!"

"How long would you keep that up? For a month, maybe. But the calluses come anyway, and after a while the fingers thicken, and the shoulders sag. Women who work like peasants come to look like peasants, Mrs. Milne, and sooner or later they think like peasants, they act like them."

"Even if that's true, who cares how I look?" I said. "It couldn't matter less! I—I feel as if I *must* live here—I'm *supposed* to! Does that sound strange? From the first day, I've loved this house—I've wanted to bring it to life! There's *nothing* I wouldn't do to own Tamarack—to save it! It's not just greed, honestly it's not! You don't *know* what she was proposing!"

"You'll do anything except permit me to be here."

"That's not fair! I'll do anything feasible!"

He shrugged, and I thought he looked bored. "Let's take a break. We can resume this council of war later, if you like."

We sat on the terrace and sipped coffee, and I pretended I hadn't any problems. The sun was warm and mellow; in its chastened light the leaves of the maples were falling like rain; only the bronze foliage of the pear tree still threw shadows against the brick. There won't be many more days like this, I reflected, and I wished it might stretch on and on, St. John and I sipping coffee in amicable silence, Pentacost prancing about barefoot on the steep roof, when St. John's voice cut across my thoughts like a cold wind.

"Mrs. Milne, why don't you explain to the town fathers that you can't pay your taxes and would like an extension?"

"I don't think it will help much. The Will states very clearly that I'm, quote, personally to attend to paying the bills when due, end of quote."

"There's no provision for a reasonable leeway, in case you are, as they say, temporarily embarrassed?"

I said uneasily, "Mr. Mansfield warned me very plainly I must be sure to live up to Gam's instructions to the letter. He as much as said Merrill would be watching me like a hawk."

"He expects she'll hale you to court over the slightest slip?"

"He seemed to think so."

He refilled my cup. "Doesn't that strike you as odd?"

"What's odd about it? He had to defend Henry's Will against Merrill, remember—he knows very well she's a fighter."

"So did your Gam know it," St. John said. "And it's obvious she wanted you here, and no one else. Why, then, did she set up conditions that are so tough for you to meet?"

"They aren't tough," I said wearily. "Every one of Gam's stipulations would be a joy to meet. It's just that she didn't have the money she thought she had—no one told her anything. She wanted to look after Grace and William, and set a sum aside for that, and I'm glad she did. I mean, they're old, I'm not."

"Mansfield should have cautioned Martha that these 'and what's left' provisions can leave the chief heir holding an empty sack."

"They didn't even tell her they accepted rent from you, to pay the fire insurance. She thought you were her guest."

"Damn it, it was Mansfield's plain duty to be frank with her!"

"He didn't want to worry her, don't you see? He hoped she'd live until the Market recovered—he said so."

"Good God, she was ninety-eight! How much more time did he think she had?"

"I'm sure he didn't realize himself how bad things were. And then—I felt so sorry for him—he seemed awfully embarrassed there was so little value left to her holdings."

The stare he now gave me was like a searchlight, and

I squirmed. "‘Embarrassed?’" he said softly. "Are you saying Dixon Mansfield was responsible for your aunt's investments?"

"Why, yes," I faltered. "Why shouldn't he be?"

He didn't answer for a moment. Then: "I wonder what she put her money in, while she was still able to handle her own affairs. Something damned sound and profitable, I've no doubt. And left it in, and turned it over to Mansfield, when she realized she wasn't as keen as she'd been." He put down his cup. "Mrs. Milne, would you let me look over that report?"

"Why not?" I said.

We went back in and sat at the trestle table. I watched his eyes skim swiftly down the complicated paragraphs. When he was done, he tapped the pages together, inserted them in the envelope, and handed it to me. "Do you have a safety deposit box? If not, get one. You don't want to lose this—not that it tells us much. And ask Mansfield for a copy of the Will, if he hasn't given you one already, and of that Letter of Conditions you must meet, and have him attest they are true copies. If you think an explanation is in order, say you need them for your own guidance."

"I don't understand—don't you trust Dixon Mansfield?"

"I've found it's best to judge people by the results of what they do, Mrs. Milne, not by the intentions they claim. In this way I pay them the compliment of assuming they are not as incompetent as they may appear."

"Was there something in that report that ought not to be?"

"Quite the contrary—something was not there that should have been. You'll notice it lists only the securities your aunt held at her death, and what they'll bring nowadays. It doesn't tell who bought them, or when, or how much was paid. I'm willing to wager anything you like that your aunt bought those holdings herself, years ago when the Market was rising. They're all stocks anybody in his right mind would have got rid of when the Market started down. But Dixon Mansfield didn't. He couldn't be an absolute babe in the woods or Martha wouldn't have put her investments in his hands, would she? And now there's just enough to cover the taxes and the debts and the various bequests, all to be paid before there's any

mention of money for Emelie. Neat footwork, Dixon! God, how nimble he's had to be, to have enough so neither house need be sold, yet not enough to be of any help to you!"

I thought of poor old Dixon Mansfield shuffling the papers on his desk, and I said, "No! I just can't believe it! Look—there wouldn't have been *time* for all this juggling, or hands-off policy, or whatever—Gam wrote that Will this past August!"

No she didn't, I recalled. Mansfield had pointed out to Merrill that the Will was almost identical to the one she wrote four years ago. Would that have given him enough time? I didn't know . . . The worst of it was, I *liked* Dixon Mansfield!

Two days later, I went in to ask for copies of the documents. It was a misty morning, the road a tunnel between bare trees standing like sentinels. I found Dixon Mansfield precisely as I had left him: kind, courteous, and obviously competent. In the orderly dignity of his office, watching him put Gam's Will into his copier as if my request were the most natural thing in the world, I had to scoff at St. John's suspicions. And if I were to judge St. John by his own standards, I thought, I would have to ask what would be the result if I *did* think he was right . . . Why, I'd not listen to Mr. Mansfield's advice, would I? Excellent advice it was, too, though I'd heard it before.

"Of course I need not repeat my—ah—my counsel to be very careful about accepting favors from anyone you really don't know. I feel—ah—a deep concern. I suppose you don't have any funds of your own to cover that pesky property tax?"

I shook my head. "Though I thought I might," I said with a rueful smile. "I almost rented Tamarack to Merrill."

"So she said. It would never have done, of course. *You* must be mistress at Tamarack, and where Merrill is, my dear, every other woman is relegated to second place. No, Emelie, you must be very prudent and make no false move. Money from some unorthodox source for the purpose of 'personally attending to paying the bills'—I believe those are Martha's words—would be very difficult to defend in court."

"Did Merrill threaten court action?"

"She did. She said there was a strong possibility her ex-husband might offer to meet your bills. I need hardly say—"

"Mr. Mansfield," I cut in, "that is *one* unorthodox source I shall certainly not tap! But I would be grateful if you would define just what would be an 'orthodox source'."

"Money that you have earned or inherited, money realized from the sale of your possessions, funds borrowed from a bank or from anyone related to you by blood or marriage."

I laughed ruefully. "I draw a blank on all of them!"

"Not quite," he said. "I am related to you, my dear, though distantly, to be sure. I am Merrill's uncle, you may recall. I had thought to lend you the money you need for the taxes, and as soon as you have sold one or two of those Victorian behemoths Martha is giving you from the River House, you could pay me back. Perhaps, I thought, the whole transaction would be overlooked by the alternate heirs, or perhaps they would regard it as my moral duty, which is to see that Martha's wishes are fulfilled. However, Merrill anticipated such an inclination on my part, and told me she would—" he had gone pale; his voice trembled and I was horrified that he might actually start to cry—"she told me frankly that she would . . . try to have me disbarred—"

"Disbarred!"

"—on the grounds that as executor of Martha's Estate, I had favored one heir over the other."

"Could she actually do that?"

He smiled bleakly. "She could try. In Welkin that would almost be as bad as if she had succeeded. However, I *must* lend you the money if you can't find it any other way."

"Oh, *no*, Mr. Mansfield!" I said. "I couldn't *let* you!"

"Rather than let Tamarack's taxes be delinquent, my dear, you must let me do just that! Perhaps she—perhaps she would be too ashamed to carry out her threat . . ."

Just wait until St. John hears this! I thought exultantly as I sped along the thread of road unreeling ahead of me through the soft white air. Dixon Mansfield sneaky, is he? Not to be trusted, is he? Ha! Dixon Mansfield is a *saint*!

Ransom's Bridge appeared and disappeared. I took the ridge road on trust, and reached the turning of our lane just as the mailman pulled away from the box.

On top of *The Welkin Horizon* (a day late) was a letter addressed to me in neat hand-printing. It had been stamped out of Welkin the day before.

Mail was now such a rarity in my life that as soon as I was back in the Audi I slit open the envelope and eagerly drew out the single sheet of paper. It, too, was neatly printed by hand:

THERE USED TO BE A LAW IN THIS STATE AGAINST CO-HABITATION WITHOUT MARRIAGE. TOO BAD THERE STILL ISN'T. TAMARACK DESERVES BETTER THAN YOU TWO.

All around me the forest dripped, a gentle letting go of the water condensing on twig and withered leaf, to drop with a whisper onto the coverlet of leaves. It sounded so clean; I felt so befouled.

I fumbled for the ignition key and started the motor. As the car crept up the lane through the smothering mist, all I could think was, *it's caught up with me . . .* All that I had fled—the threat of harm, the creeping fear—the evil I thought I had escaped—it was all here too. The world was of a piece. No place was any better than any other. Any cleaner. Any safer.

Chapter Seventeen



He was out when I got home, and I was glad of it.

My first impulse was to put the letter into the stove. Fire cleanses, I thought dully, staring into the circle of flames. But even if I burned the paper it wouldn't destroy the words, or the malice behind them. Besides, I might need the letter, though for what, I couldn't imagine. Evidence, perhaps. Or exorcism.

I dropped the envelope into the fire and slipped the letter between the pages of *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, inconspicuous on the shelf in the pantry. The copies of the Will and of the Letter of Conditions I put in the center of the trestle table. And then I fixed sandwiches, and made fresh coffee, and set it at the back of the stove to keep hot.

Who could have sent it? Merrill? She leapt to the mind, of course, but would she have worded such a . . . communication . . . quite in this way? Somehow I didn't think she would show quite so much restraint. Although one couldn't be sure . . . Perhaps she had a subtle mind.

Well, then, Gordon Fenwick? No. If he should want to ease me out of Tamarack, he'd go about it with no more deviousness than a—a bull in the pasture. Forget Gordon Fenwick.

Justin . . . My mind skittered away and I had to collar it, spin it around, force it to face the name squarely. Justin St. John would be capable of the surpassing craft of that direct attack on himself as well as on me—clever, very clever. He must be counted among those who wanted me away from Tamarack; there was no denying that until I came he had had free rein, and could have stayed on indefinitely. Yet . . . would he send something unsigned . . . would he do anything so shabby? However much he wished me elsewhere . . .

Perhaps it had nothing to do with my being at Tamarack. Perhaps it was no more than a drop of venom from a pen dipped into the poison of puritanical fanaticism. Deese Ransom? I had no reason to think he had a burn-sinner-burn complex. Pentacost? He'd more likely be upset if he knew we weren't living together than to meddle if he thought we were. Ken Kendall? Dixon Mansfield? I was getting absurd.

Supposing it wasn't religion gone rancid, but that most corrosive of acids, sexual jealousy. Merrill, again? And again I was being absurd. She must know St. John's inclinations; she need only consider me objectively for one minute to be confident he would not be interested in me in that way.

Then who? Who?

I went to the terrace door and stared into the mist. Even as I watched, the base of the pear tree appeared,

and the lilacs further down the slope. All at once I was standing in clear shadowless air, the lake and the tamaracks plainly in sight. Then the sun broke through, the last of the mist swirled up into a pale sky, and it was a lovely day.

He came striding up the slope as if the steep incline and the entangling weeds were nothing to him. He saw me, and waved, and quickened his pace. *Not he!* I thought. He might taunt me to my face, but crawl like a snake to sink a fang in my heel? Never!

"Look, the sun is shining!" I said ridiculously.

He mounted the steps two at a time. "I bring you a message from Pentacost. We dine on venison liver. He'll bring it along when he comes to work on the roof. I take it you've never eaten any? In that case I'll cook tonight. It would be sacrilege to have anyone *manning* (excuse the word) the frying pan who doesn't regard the liver of the Lord of the Forest with veneration."

And now my inconvenient conscience nagged at me. Just because, that first time, I hadn't suspected anything was illegal until after I'd eaten, that didn't mean I could make out-of-season venison a staple of my diet.

"Bow season starts in two days, Mrs. Milne," he said levelly. "Every deer in Vermont, doe and buck alike, will be a legal target. Not every man will bring down his quarry as Pentacost does, with one arrow straight to the heart. And of all the hunters who swarm over these hills, how many need the meat for food? Perhaps one in ten. Do you really begrudge Pentacost his feast?"

All I could think to say was, "Oh—is he to join us?"

"I asked him, but he refused. I think he felt I don't know my place. He gave a sly snigger and said I ought to of knowed better."

There it was again, that salute-in-passing to Madam Landlady.

We sat down at the trestle table and I handed him the *Horizon*.

"I brought the mail," I remarked casually, and watched to see if he were watching me . . . No, I didn't think so.

He laid the paper aside. "I take it you have already checked the so-called employment opportunities? You could shine as a short-order cook—you certainly slice a mean salami."

"Thanks a lot." Then, because I could wait no longer: "Why don't you ask if I saw Mr. Mansfield?"

"It is writ as clear as day on your face that you did. He must have said something choice to have roused in you that keen anticipation of lording it over me with *a-ha-ha's* and *I told you so's*." I could feel the face in question go scarlet. "You note I have not stretched forth my hand to snatch up that Will you left so brazenly in sight." He helped himself to another sandwich. "I refuse to talk business at table—I at least am struggling to maintain some standards of decorum here."

Dear God! I was so sure he couldn't have . . . It was innocent badinage . . . words selected by chance . . .

He said quietly, "For God's sake, what have I said now?"

"N-nothing!" I gathered my wits. "Mr. Mansfield offered to lend me money for the taxes—what have you to say to that?"

"At the moment, also nothing." He refilled his cup. "I'm waiting for the *dénouement*. The hitch. The reason why, after all, *much* as he would like to, he can't."

"There is no hitch! He can, and he will! I mean, he *would*, only I won't let him!"

"Why ever not? Surely you aren't afraid he'll move in here and refuse to move out? Really, Mrs. Milne, you need fear no offensive importunities from Mansfield, at least."

I leapt to my feet. "That's not it at all!" I choked. I snatched up the Will and the Letter and fairly flung them at him. "*Read* them, why don't you? I swear to God I think you *enjoy* playing with me like a—a cat with a mouse!" To my horror and without any reason whatsoever I burst into tears. "What makes you think I *like* having to f-fight for Tamarack? What makes you think I want to be envied—*dear God*, no wonder we aren't supposed to covet! It's h-horrible! No—leave me alone!" For he was coming round the table.

"I have no intention of touching you," he said evenly. "Here—mop your face. There's brandy in that cupboard—"

"I don't need any brandy!" I sobbed. "Thuh-thank you!" And I took the handkerchief he was offering.

"You're welcome," he said, staring at me as if he'd

never seen a woman break down before. "Go outside and get hold of yourself. I'll read the damned Will and be out in a few minutes."

I went onto the terrace and sucked in deep breaths and wiped my face. What *had* I been crying about? That damned letter, I supposed. I should have cried when I first read it, and not tried to be so . . . whatever I'd been . . . analytical. It was no use to bottle up tears—I ought to know that by now.

I heard his step behind me. "Now do you see?" I said in a tight voice. "How can I borrow money from Dixon Mansfield? Merrill threatened to have him disbarred if he favors one heir over another!"

"I don't think there's any doubt he's doing just that. However, it's not you he's favoring, Mrs. Milne. Listen to me with an open mind, if you can. Try to pretend it's not I whom you dislike and distrust who is telling you this—"

"Never mind that!" I said sharply. "Do come to the point!"

"Martha wanted you and no one else to have Tamarack. She drafted her Will, and the Letter which elaborates on the Will, so that if you are to inherit you must have money, and there is no money—not for *your* use. Her lawyer, for what reason we can only guess, did not advise her so as to avoid that eventuality. Now if you don't keep Tamarack, who gets it? Why, Gordon and Merrill, which is as good as saying it goes to Merrill, since Martha says one must buy the other out. And Merrill has money. Gordon has none of his own. Even if he sold the River House, it wouldn't raise half the 'fair market value' of Tamarack—"

"Oh yes it would!" I said. "That's a very valuable location, right there in Welkin, right by the river that way! And Tamarack's land isn't good for much—Gam said so. It's too rocky."

"There speaks the last century," St. John said with a thin smile. "What could be more valuable than several hundred acres, virgin and unspoiled, just waiting to be raped by your 'second home in the hills' pirates? You dread what Merrill might do to the house. I *know* what she'd do to the land. How long do you think she'd be content to live here? How long before she'd be bored to distraction? Then she'll have in the bulldozers and the chain

saws. When you shudder at your present appraisal of a hundred dollars an acre, bear in mind Merrill could sell off the land piecemeal at twenty times that, fifty times that—"

"She can't!" I cried. "The Will—no, the Letter of Conditions—says it can't be subdivided!"

"Read it again. *You* can't subdivide it. Nor can anyone to whom you sell it, or you bequeath it. There's no stipulation that the alternate heirs cannot . . . as Dixon Mansfield surely knew, and as he failed to point out to your Gam." I stared at him in horror. "Did you really think Merrill wants to live here for sentiment's sake? Not she! She should have been a man—she has all the appropriate piratical instincts. Women, when they want money, want it for some (shall we say) creative purpose—to restore a house, as you do, or to educate a child, or just to deck themselves out in expensive lures, to get or hold a man. It's a male trait to want wealth for its own sake, for the power that comes with it. I don't scorn money—it buys such pretty things: a fine wine, a painting, a jewel, a woman—but there ought to be limits to what a man will destroy in order to be rich. Merrill doesn't understand this any more than Henry did."

He was right, of course. She would get tired of Tamarack. But first she would play with it, she would make changes no one could ever put right, she would *ruin* it—if I let her. And when she tired of it she would discard it. As she had tired of St. John . . . No doubt she had tried to change him—*had* changed him, for all I knew—and then, bored, had cast him off as a child drops a toy that no longer amuses.

"Let me remind you, Mrs. Milne," he was saying, "that Mansfield is much more closely related to Merrill than to you—he is her father's brother. She told me once he'd been in love with her mother, and would have married her but Donnet cut him out. However that may be, if you imagine that Mansfield wants you here in Merrill's stead, you are more of a fool than even I take you for."

I swallowed painfully. "Mr. Mansfield *loved* Gam, I know he did—he wouldn't want to see her Tamarack destroyed!"

"I suspect he's just beginning to know the real Merrill," St. John remarked dryly. "But she was stupid to

threaten him over the little matter of your tax money. It would be more to the point, I should think, to hope living here alone turns out to be too damned tough, or scary, or depressing, and you forfeit Tamarack simply because you can't take any more solitary confinement."

"But Merrill wouldn't know about that," I said. "It's only in the Letter, all that about my having to be here, and Mr. Mansfield quite properly didn't show it to her."

"She knows about it now," he said dryly. "You made it plain enough, didn't you, when you were parrying her offer to rent?" When I said nothing, he went on remorselessly, "There are other circumstances in which Merrill and Gordon inherit in your stead. Can you remember at least one of them, Mrs. Milne?"

I felt like a child taking an exam; I had that same all-gone feeling in the pit of my stomach. "If I should die," I whispered.

"Exactly." His eyes held mine. "Mansfield had no business to let such a clause go unchallenged. Even if he knew the alternate heirs to be absolute saints, there are always the heirs of the heirs. Given her penchant for matrimony, Merrill may acquire yet another husband. What if he were another poor besotted fool who wants her to have whatever her heart desires?" He smiled coldly. "No lawyer has the right to be pure of heart or the soul of innocence and trust. He ought to have a criminal mind, Mrs. Milne, so he can protect his clients and not send them forth defenseless as the proverbial shorn lamb. *He* may trim their fleece, but the world should not be able to!"

"Plato," I said faintly. "I think."

"Did Mansfield offer you the loan on the grounds he's your Gam's executor, duty-bound to see her wishes carried out, or on the basis of his scarcely traceable relationship, or what?"

"He said whatever money I spend on Tamarack must come from an 'orthodox source'—"

"Which he is and I am not?"

He was still offended by my refusal to accept his help, I saw, and I said hesitantly, "Yes. He said an 'orthodox source' is someone related to me by blood or marriage."

St. John smiled. "Fine. Splendid. We'll get married and he cannot possibly cavil when I pay your bills. In fact, it will be my legal obligation to do so."

"*Are you busy next weekend?*" Bard had managed that much with proper cool; and then, in a voice shaking with emotion: "*Don't say no, Emelie! Oh, don't say no! I couldn't bear it!*" He couldn't bear it after I said yes, I thought in anguish, and remarked with some difficulty, "You're not being amusing, Mr. St. John, although your suggestion is ridiculous, I grant you that!"

"Why is it ridiculous? When you said yourself there is nothing you wouldn't do to keep Tamarack? I hate to keep harping in this vulgar fashion, but you have less than two weeks to locate an *orthodox* source of some thirty-seven hundred dollars."

I said incredulously, "You mean you have that kind of money available—" I snapped my fingers—"just like that?"

"I would hardly suggest a marriage of convenience if it weren't convenient."

If by chance he were serious, it wouldn't do to laugh, or behave as if I found his offer offensive. But if he were making game of me, and I were to refuse graciously, even gratefully, it would enrich the jest beyond bearing. I said cautiously, "And when did you conceive this truly original idea?"

"Hardly original, Mrs. Milne. Historically, the marriage of convenience antedates the marriage of passion, or (if you prefer) of love, by several millennia. The latter is a relatively recent concept, examples of which, incidentally, have proved to be neither as durable nor as practical as the—ah—the higher, more intellectual approach." He dropped his mock professorial manner and went on carelessly: "The notion came to me when I was reading the Will, to be precise, when I came to that section which specifies that half of Martha's wine cellar goes to your father, that is, to you. 'What a dowry!' thought I. 'A man would be willing to marry her for that—'"

I was on my feet. "I *beg* your pardon! I did you the courtesy of assuming you were serious—"

"But I most certainly am. I never propose marriage frivolously. I have always considered it an affair of vital—or perhaps I should say deadly—consequences. You ask when did the notion strike me. I am sorry my frank answer offends you."

"Mr. St. John," I said sweetly, "when I said there was

nothing I wouldn't do to have Tamarack, it wasn't quite true. You call the kind of marriage you propose p-practical. I call it s-something else—"

"That also starts with 'p'?" he said helpfully. "Good God, I thought it was clear I meant 'in name only'! Do set your mind at rest, Mrs. Milne. I told you I am no villain. What makes you think I would propose that you sell your body to save the homestead? My God, how tritel!" And he actually laughed.

I said in a shaking voice, "I haven't had the experience of the world that you have, Mr. St. John, and I get many of my ideas out of books. I can't imagine, in any novel I've ever read, a *hero* who would offer to pay the heroine's bills to the tune of thousands of dollars, and in return expect nothing!"

"On the contrary, I would expect a great deal," he said coolly. "To begin with, I would request you to stop thinking of yourself as a heroine—it is a singularly irritating trait, especially in a wife. Secondly, I would have the exquisite pleasure of seeing my former wife prey to the most satisfying attacks of frustrated covetousness. Thirdly, I would have the right to live here myself—it would no longer be a privilege for which I must beg. If I lack the virtues of a hero or the vices of a villain, so do I lack the humbleness of spirit requisite for the role of beggar. I want to stay here in order to bring as near completion as possible something that means much to me. As your legal husband I would have that right."

He was a gentleman, whatever Dixon Mansfield thought: he did not add the obvious, that as a woman I held no interest or attraction for him whatsoever. Which was reassuring, of course.

"Well?" he said. "What do you say? This offer will not be repeated, I assure you."

"I'll not ask you again! Either you want to or you don't—don't play with me, Emelie—just say yes! Please, please say yes!" Yes, Bard, I said, and it had been the death of him.

"I can't," I said in a low voice. "Thank you very much, Mr. St. John—I just can't. I c-can't explain—"

For no more than a heartbeat something flamed in his eyes. Then it was gone, and he was saying in his usual cool, slightly mocking voice, "You make your feelings to-

ward me more than clear. You won't borrow, you won't wed, not even to keep Tamarack. Very well. The subject is obviously distasteful to you; I assure you I won't mention it again." He glanced down the slope. "Here comes Pentacost, right on cue. Good. This is an awkward moment and we can be grateful for the arrival of a third party, can't we? To lessen the embarrassment," he said, looking anything but embarrassed. "Although this is the second time I've proposed marriage, it is my first refusal, and all first times are awkward, aren't they?" He handed me the envelope with the Letter and the Will. "Here, you'd better put these in some safe—" After a moment he went on evenly, "I see I shall have to rid myself of the habit of interfering in your affairs. What you do with the damned things is your business. Burn them, lose them, publish them in the *Horizon*—it's all one to me."

Before the afternoon was out, it was obvious I had lost a friend. Two, actually: Pentacost quit calling me Emmy and was referring to me as 'her'. Passing the slate up to him in an effort to speed the work to completion, St. John was in a vile mood; who else but I could have been the cause?

St. John cooked the venison liver and I suppose he did a masterly job, but it tasted like dust and ashes to me. He treated me with the impersonal courtesy he might show a stranger, not really seeing me when he offered me wine or troubled me for the salt. I found myself counting the days until he would be gone. How soon after I defaulted on the taxes I too would have to go, I didn't know, but I wished I could have these last days to say goodbye to Tamarack alone . . . or if not alone, then with the St. John who had come striding up through the tangled garden eagerly, joyously, as a man comes home, I thought. It was obvious to me now he must have been thinking all along of Tamarack as his own, and was bitterly disappointed his plans had come to nothing; he was not used to having any schemes of his thwarted, I suspected, and to top everything, possibly his masculine ego was stung: no doubt he was accustomed to having every female succumb instantly, did he so much as cock an eyebrow in her direction. . . . But what else could I possibly have done but reject him?

Late Friday afternoon, Pentacost announced, to some

spot about fifteen inches to my left, that he had finished the roof and it ought to keep out the rain for another hundred years. When I thanked him, and asked how much I owed him, he shot a disgusted look two feet to the right of me and said, "I don't talk money to no female. Justin is payin' me and it's between me and him."

"I'll bring your cider tomorrow," St. John said.

"Don't get mistook for a deer. I'd hate to have one of them damfool hunters drill a bunghole in my barrel."

Saturday I had Tamarack to myself, and I was free to wander about the house unobserved, saying farewell to each empty room. Somehow I lost track of the time, and it was nearly two o'clock before I brought my sandwich and tea onto the terrace, and sat in the sun, my back against the warm brick. When I leave, I thought, wherever I go I'll be homesick, as Gam was homesick, for these mouse-gray, deer-brown slopes where now and again like scattered coins the golden aspens shimmer . . . I stood up and brushed the crumbs from my lap. I must stop this, I thought: I must stop saying *farewell farewell* before I'm actually driven out. I'll go down to the lake. Perhaps I'll go further, and talk to Gam . . .

When I reached the lake, I could not see the heron anywhere; one would think Merrill's schemes had already driven him away. Where now was silence there would be brittle laughter; smoke from cigarette and barbecue would smother the scent of crushed fern. No, I couldn't go to see Gam. The only news I had for her was such that I couldn't mention it without seeming to criticize. Tamarack was slipping away from me, but it wasn't her fault; she'd done the best she knew. So had Dixon Mansfield, no matter what anybody said. No, the fault was mine. I'd turned down the chance St. John offered me, and more out of pride than prudence.

I didn't want to walk back up the way I'd come, with the house reproaching me for my exaggerated sense of self-worth—well, for whatever *had* caused me to say no. I'd return through the woods; that way, with Tamarack out of sight, perhaps for a short while I could escape this feeling that I'd been tested and found wanting.

These woods on the west might never have been cut, not even in Israel Carson's time. The troweled-silver trunks of the slow-growing beeches were more than two

feet thick, and the great craggy-barked maples were twice that. The whole forest smelled yeasty, decaying, yet clean. Between the trees stretched a carpet of falling leaves like a rag rug, patched here and there with moss or embroidered with little pointy ferns blanched by frost to thread-worn ghosts. It was other-worldly, something out of a folk tale, and I wished I could be here in the spring, when the leaves would be newly minted green, and the air would glow like a jewel.

I came out of the forest proper to find myself on the edge of the overgrown orchard. In front of me was a wreck of an apple tree, half of it still alive, with red fruit clinging. I looked about me to get my bearings, and I could see the gable end of Tamarack above the invading pines. As I worked my way through I found, spaced like a checkerboard, apple trees every thirty feet or so. I took pleasure in each discovery, and had quite put from my mind all thoughts of separation and loss—I was for a little while mindlessly happy, a child enjoying a solitary game—when I found myself directly behind the root cellar, or smoke house, or whatever it was, that mound like a giant mole hill.

On an impulse I scampered up its slope, kicking the dead leaves noisily as I went. I peered down the air vent. "Hello-ello-ello," I said idiotically. "Is anybody there?"

And was observed. By something . . . from somewhere. I could feel it.

After a moment I looked cautiously around, as if to move suddenly might provoke . . . whatever it was. I could see nothing: trees, bracken, grasses, all were silent. I thought of St. John's warnings about deer hunters, and I stared along the edge of the woods and swept with my eyes what I could see of the cut-over rise north of the house, of the tangled slope to the lake. Nothing . . . no one. Nerves again, I thought in disgust. Fanciful Emelie, conjuring up threats and dangers.

A wind had sprung up, disturbing the leaves and fingering my hair. The air blowing in at the entrance to the root cellar escaped up the vent with a sighing sound that in my state of nerves I found disquieting, and I moved away from the opening and slid down the mound. When I reached ground level I happened to glance up at the house, and was surprised to see how late it had grown.

The sun was glinting off the windows of the Hogarth room. For a moment or two they seemed blinded by its light: blind golden rectangles staring. Then the light shifted, a cloud blew across the sun, and of a sudden I could see in.

There was a light in the room like a candle moving. Sunlight through the south windows reflecting from the wall, of course—there was no one in the house to walk about with a candle, and besides, it was full daylight still—one wouldn't need a candle until it was dark.

I moved over in front of the entrance to the smoke house. *Was* there no one in the house? Could there not be someone in there, watching me . . . watching . . . someone with a candle . . . *Dear God, was it an arsonist?* And looking out toward the root cellar, looking toward the lane, to see if it was time yet . . . I could see the set of his shoulders: they were broad and sloping, like St. John's.

Shakily, I began to laugh. Of course! St. John had come back while I was out, and I was imagining—well, better not put it into words, or I'd doubt my own mind.

The Bible door and the north door were locked. I ran around the east end of the house—it was the easier way, no snarls of berry bushes to slow me—and hurried along the terrace to the pantry door. At the foot of the steep and narrow stairs I stopped to listen. Nothing. "Hello!" I called, and the sound came back to me the way a voice does in an empty house.

But I'd *seen* him. I'd seen someone! What if it *was* an arsonist, and he was waiting . . . But they didn't start fires on the second floor: they put things in the cellar. . . . What if it was St. John and he couldn't answer for some reason . . . he'd fainted (I couldn't imagine it) and struck his head on the hearth . . . the arsonist had struck him down and he was bleeding, he couldn't answer when I called because he was dying . . .

I stared up the narrow stairs: the door at the top was locked, and the key was on the hook in the kitchen. I slipped the key into my pocket and took up a thin-bladed knife, and carrying this openly and at the ready, I went through to the main house and up the curving stair and silently along the halls to the door to the Hogarth room. The door was unlocked. I swung it open.

The room was empty.

From the doorway (I didn't go in—why should I?) I scanned the floorboards. There was no sign of wax drippings anywhere. There need be none, of course—the candle could have been in a holder. And obviously, since St. John wasn't here, prone on the floor, he wasn't in the house, or he would have answered my call. Then who . . .

This time I locked the door, leaving the key in the lock. Then, yielding to my preference for the curving stairs—you can see all around, before and while you're going down—I went along to the main house, where (purely as a matter of habit) I glanced out the Palladian window toward the lake.

St. John was mounting the steps to the terrace.

"Expert at laying traps and snares . . ." Well, some of them were just a bit too obvious! Trying to scare me into leaving, with all that rot about hunters prowling about with lethal weapons . . . then lurking about, to make me think I wasn't safe even inside the house! Well, I was onto him and he might as well know it!

I unlocked the door noisily at the head of the pantry stairs, clattered down into the kitchen, and made quite a production of slipping the knife back into its holder. St. John's eyes narrowed.

"More ghosts?" he said pleasantly. "Conventional weapons aren't of much use, you know. I believe you need garlic—no, that's for vampires. Crucifixes, that's the ticket."

"However did you get out so quickly?" I said, equally pleasantly. "You must have scuttled as fast as a rat."

He had been in the act of pouring himself a cup of coffee, but at that he stood motionless, staring hard at me.

"I think you had better explain that 'scuttle'."

"You don't think it's accurate? I saw you in the Hogarth room, you know. Didn't you intend me to? There you stood, looking out the window. I thought the whole idea was for me to see you. Then when I ran around and went up and you weren't there—well, I'm impressed, that's all. It was pretty speedy—"

It was more than speedy, I thought. It was impossible.

"You saw me? Where were you?"

"You know where I was," I said in a shaky voice. "I was right in front of the root cellar, not thirty feet away."

He stirred his coffee. "Let me put it another way. Not 'you saw me,' but, 'you saw *me*?' "

I hesitated. "Well, I saw *somebody*," I said. "Somebody with shoulders—a man—I assumed it was you. Who else would it be?"

"You thought it was me, so you ran upstairs with a long thin knife? Good God, Mrs. Milne, I assure you I was *not* trespassing! I had no idea you felt so—ah—so passionately about my keeping to my own territory!"

"Very funny," I said coldly. "Excuse me if I don't laugh. I didn't accuse you of trespassing. I didn't run upstairs to drive you out at knife point. When I called and you didn't answer, I thought—well, I thought something might have happened to you—"

His lips twitched. "So you ran upstairs to rescue me?"

"It was an idiotic thing to do, I agree. Truly laughable. I can't imagine why I bothered!"

"And what did you find? Bloodstained fingerprints? Signs of struggle? Desperate messages in the dust?"

"I found precisely what you intended me to find—an empty room. No one in the house but myself. Which is why I'm so impressed with your speed!"

He put down his cup. "Before we carry this conversation further, supposing I just check that out. Give me your keys—"

"You think the intruder ducked through a locked door?"

"There are such things as duplicate keys." When I started to follow him: "You stay here and watch the back stairs. If anybody starts down, sing out."

He went through to the dining room. For a while I didn't hear any more; then he was in the hall above, and I thought I heard him open the Hogarth room door. After a moment he called to me. "Emelie, come on up, will you? I want to show you something." He sounded both amused and annoyed.

I went up. He had the Hogarth room door open, all right, and the sun was slanting in, was nearly down by now, shining right in my eyes. I stood beside him in the doorway and I could see the air was full of specks of dust dancing.

"Look at the floor," he said. I looked. "What do you see?"

"I don't see anything," I said. "What am I supposed to see?"

"You ought to see my footprints, at least," he said. "Since I was scuttling around up here." He walked two steps into the room, turned, and came back. "They ought to look like that."

I could see his footprints clearly: they were the only marks in the dust on the floor. I stepped back down the hallway. I could see my tracks, the marks I'd made just now and those earlier ones, where I'd come to the doorway and looked in . . . looked for candle droppings and seen nothing on the smooth, untouched dust . . .

"Pay attention to detail," he advised me in a friendly tone. "When you're concocting a case against somebody, think it through. Tangible evidence is everything."

I turned and fled down the stairs to the kitchen. He followed.

"About that 'scuttle'—"

"All right, so I made a mistake!" I broke in hotly. "So no one was up there! I apologize! Forget it! *Forget it!*" I lifted my coffee cup, and the liquid slopped. Using both hands, I set it down. "I really *did* see someone up there. I saw *something*. So it wasn't you. Okay, I believe you, it wasn't you. Then who—what *was* it?"

He was watching me coldly. "Don't try so hard, Emelie. Why should I make like a ghost—that was the general idea, wasn't it?—now you see it, now you don't? I don't want you *scuttling* and running—" I could see that word rankled—"because when you go, I have to go. I have another ten days paid for, and I like to get full value for my money. I sha'n't start haunting Tamarack in dead earnest until the thirty-first at least."

"I thought I saw a candle moving." It clung to me, that feeling I'd had—I couldn't shake it off—of the house being vulnerable . . . invaded. "I thought maybe it was arsonists," I said.

"Oh, *hell*," he said wearily. "Nobody is trying to scare you away from here, Mrs. Milne. Nobody is trying to burn your house down. The light was playing tricks, that's all. The glass in those windows is old, and flawed—it could reflect the light unevenly and make you think there's something there. Then when it proved to be noth-

ing, you looked for someone to blame, and there I was, your friendly neighborhood whipping boy."

It was behind the glass, I wanted to say, but I didn't. "If you're so sure nobody is trying to scare me away," I said, "why did you say somebody would try to kill me?"

"I didn't say 'would'—I said 'might'. I was trying to open your eyes to how much the Will is slanted in Merrill's favor, in the hope you might regard Mansfield's admonitions against me with a bit more skepticism. I see now I was entirely too subtle."

"What makes you think Mr. Mansfield said one word against you?"

"I assumed he felt that *that*, at any rate, was a duty he must not shirk." He grinned. "Look, you must be light-headed from lack of food. Let's eat. For a flagging appetite nothing beats a mile through the woods rolling a two hundred and fifty pound barrel of cider. Shall I broil your steak?"

"Thanks," I said. "Just go easy on the arsenic."

I was trying to be funny, but it didn't come out that way. The trouble was, just as I spoke the notion flashed through my mind that he'd never before volunteered where he'd been—it was as if he'd offered an alibi.

"Guilty until proved innocent, is that it?" he said in a hard voice. Then, more quietly: "Would you like me to leave tonight, Mrs. Milne?"

I felt sick. "No, *please* don't! I don't know what gets into me, to say such things."

"I think it's a mistake to write your own script," he said coldly. "Then when you cast yourself in the lead—enter our heroine, endangered but undaunted—your little fantasy becomes ridiculous. And damned tiresome, I might add."

The warm weather held, and he was gone most of Monday and Tuesday. I continued with my housecleaning, but my heart wasn't in it; such work becomes drudgery when there's nothing to look forward to. Wednesday broke cold and rainy. When St. John took up his stance at his easel, I thought I'd run a few errands in Welkin, if I might borrow the car.

"Help yourself," he said indifferently.

So I went in and rented a safety deposit box, putting

therein (as advised) Dixon Mansfield's preliminary accounting, the Will, and the Letter of Conditions. It seemed a waste of money: a year's rent for one month's safe-keeping of a few papers I probably could just as well scrap.

It was well after noon before I was back. The rain had stopped, though the day was still overcast. St. John had left a sandwich for me on the table; I wrapped it in a napkin. "I think I'll go for a walk," I said. He didn't look up. I pulled on my boots and went out, and went around the raspberry bushes and past the lilacs to the rear of the mound, where it was easy to climb.

I stood on the top, munching my sandwich, which had lots of onion and tasted very good. There wasn't any draft sobbing up the air vent; everything was very peaceful. Of course the light was different from that other time: it was early afternoon, not late, and there wasn't really any sun. I couldn't see anything out of the ordinary in the Hogarth room, only the vague shape of the prints on the opposite wall, and that empty, neglected look that seems natural when you look through naked windows.

There was St. John against the north window in the kitchen. He kept moving slightly: a step forward, then back. . . . Could it be the same? The . . . whatever I'd seen . . . had had the hard shoulderline and the abrupt drop to the sleeve that a man's coat will give. I hadn't been able to see detail, of course, just the silhouette, but the line had been sharp, not fluid, the way St. John's shoulder and arm sort of flowed, in his flannel shirt . . . I moved a little, and the panes changed, too, not much, but enough to betray how irregular they were. I drew a deep breath. It was *absurd* to stand here, every nerve on edge! Go talk it over with Gam—it was as simple as that. Go over to the graveyard and see what she thought . . .

So down I went, down through the snarl of frost-killed weeds through the bracken by the lake, up the lane and in at the gate. Gam was as I'd left her, under bare ground, with only the drifting leaves to gentle the raw new look.

I set a flat stone between them, between Martha and her brother Luke, and I sat on its dry surface and hugged my knees and thought. Or tried to think. Did I really believe that somehow St. John had loomed by that window without leaving any prints in the dust, and then had got himself out and down into the meadow before I could

come racing around the house? Of course I didn't. As Gam would say, the idea wouldn't hold water in a well. Then, did I think it was a ghost—I faced the word squarely—and if so, did I really believe in ghosts? I'd told St. John I did, but did I *really*—the kind that clank and groan and all that nonsense? Of course I didn't! What I'd meant was that I believe in the continuation of what we've done . . . or not done, what we've failed at—these things can haunt us. They look back at us from the pages of a book, they whisper to us in the night . . .

I'd been tired, and I was suggestible, and the glass in that window was very old, full of wobbles and ripples and flaws and possibly even bubbles of air. The sun had been behind the trees and these had been moving in the wind . . . shadows that stir about can be very deceiving . . .

I felt much better. It had all been something I'd perceived out of my fatigue and my worry and my loneliness, and the thing to do was to put it out of my mind. I had other, immediate, *real* problems on which I'd better concentrate.

As clear as anything, I could hear Gam: how Tamarack was a house that had known too much hate, and needed—what had she said?—needed to be “sanctified by love.” Love which I already could offer, I knew that. . . . How she'd wanted me to go to Tamarack—“You go for me—” . . . And if I didn't stay, then she was never, through me, going to be able to return. I owed it to Gam to stay, by whatever means I could . . . by whatever means I was offered.

“So why you say the house is lonely I can't imagine—how could Tamarack be lonely with a man like Justin walking through the rooms?”

Of course he hadn't been making like a ghost! The idea was idiotic. And if he hadn't been playing tricks on me, then he hadn't been trying to scare me away. Or scare me into marriage. Shame me or scare me, with that stupid letter. So why *couldn't* I marry him? As he said, such a joining of forces for mutual benefit has been an accepted custom for centuries. And it wasn't as if we'd *really* be man and wife. Just a legal ceremony, initiating a mutually agreeable business arrangement, with a quiet divorce perhaps after one year, when I could have arranged to sell the Victorian pieces, and thus could afford to keep Tamarack safe. Safe from Merrill, safe for Gam, safely mine.

I stood up—I was stiff from cold—and looked about for a handful of blossoms to offer her. There wasn't much choice—a stalk or two of asters—but I picked several florets, and three fronds of dry fern, and formed them into a nosegay, which I laid by Gam's hand. Then I did the same for Emelie Stark. I would have left flowers with everyone, but the rain started up again and I thought I'd better get back before it poured in earnest. I commenced to hurry along the dusky lane.

"Wait for me—oh, wait for me!"

It rang so clearly in my mind I stumbled and almost fell. Had it been along here that Luke had fled, dragging Catherine, Martha running after? Where had they been going, then, if they came this way?

"Wait for me . . ."

Shivering, I dashed across the terrace through the chill rain to find St. John at the trestle table, coffee at hand, the *Horizon* open before him to the classified ads. I took off my scarf and shook it; drops falling on the stove hissed and danced.

"I'll have one in there myself next week," I said brightly. "How does this sound? 'Jill-of-all-trades wants work by hour, day, week, or forever. What do you need done? I'll do it. What will you pay? I'll take it.'"

"You may be surprised by some of the answers you get," he said dryly.

I poured myself a cup of coffee, curled my hands around its warmth, and sipped, watching him over the cup's rim. He looked tired; for the first time it occurred to me he, too, might be feeling that time was running out. In that case, why didn't he—

"Well," he said, "what's the verdict?"

"Not guilty," I said.

He smiled thinly. "Not guilty of what? Impersonating a ghost?"

"That, and other things."

Wasn't he going to ask what other things? Apparently not. Didn't he see *why* I'd been so skeptical about him? Wasn't he going to salvage his pride with some sarcastic remark and then once again suggest—no, he wasn't. He had said it was an offer that would not be repeated, and he wasn't going to repeat it. I could hardly blame him. Twice he had offered to lend me money, and twice I had

refused. I had refused once—perhaps both times, I couldn't remember now—on the grounds I didn't trust him not 'to push an advantage'—whatever *that* meant. I had turned down his generous offers of help by insulting him. Still he had gone on to offer what would really have solved everything: marriage. And what had I done? I had said the idea was ridiculous. It hadn't been ridiculous at all—it was the only way I could stay here.

I had a clear choice: Tamarack, or my pride.

"Mr. St. John," I said with some difficulty, for my heart was thudding noisily and appeared to be mislocated, constricting my breath, "I—I have been very much mistaken about you, I see that now. I have viewed you with quite unjustified suspicion. I am truly ashamed to have been so—uh—so small-minded. I *do* want to stay at Tamarack more than anything in the world, and you have offered me the one—the only means to stay—" He was watching me with an inscrutable expression: he wasn't going to help me out, I could see that. I went on in a shaking voice: "You suggested we marry. I refused. I—I have reconsidered. If your offer is still open, I would like to—to accept."

"How magnanimous you are, Mrs. Milne," he said quietly. "How very graciously you condescend to change your mind. No, that offer is not still open."

I stared at him, scarlet with shame, unable to speak.

He picked up the *Horizon*, a faint smile on his lips. "I'm hooked on the ads," he remarked. "They're the best part of the paper. The skis used once, good as new—the skis, that is. The electric guitar to be swapped for a baby's crib. 'Is there a bear bothering your bees? Coons in the corn? Fox in the henhouse? Call Frenchie—'"

I stumbled to my feet and picked up the coffee cups. Tit for tat . . . my *God*, it was humiliating to be refused! No wonder he wouldn't ask me twice!

He rose and carried the remaining dishes to the sink. "No, that particular offer isn't still open," he said in so casual a tone he caught me off guard. "But perhaps you'd be interested in making one somewhat like it. For instance, you might suggest we marry, and that it would be, as I said before, a business arrangement between us, but we would be at particular pains no one would realize it is not a genuine marriage. Another appearance of Merrill as

villainess-about-to-drag-you-to-court must border on the tedious; nevertheless I'm obliged to point out that if she suspected our marriage had a practical rather than an emotional basis, it would be just like her to attempt to prove fraud—a distasteful contingency, to say the least. As for myself, I am reasonably indifferent to gossip, but I don't wish to be ridiculed as the man who hasn't bedded his bride. If you are willing, then, to keep your own counsel, and confide in no one the true state of affairs, as well as, perhaps, when in public to counterfeit a passion you don't feel—?”

I was fervently scouring out a coffee cup. “I—I'm not very demonstrative,” I said, flushing.

“No, no, nothing in bad taste, Mrs. Milne. I meant no more than that you assume a modestly affectionate mien, and not wince if I call you ‘my dear’. Do you think you could manage that much?”

I scrubbed away at the second cup. “If I try very, *very* hard,” I said. “If I school myself ruthlessly!”

He grinned. “Well, then? Do I understand you to propose such a marriage as I have described?”

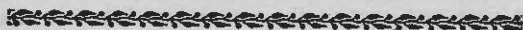
Oh, *no*, he wasn't going to ask *me* again! I said in an unsteady voice, “Yes, Mr. St. John. I propose such a marriage.”

“And I accept, Mrs. Milne,” he said gravely. “Thank you very much.”

“You're welcome,” I said. And I smiled shyly at him.

I was sorry if a smile in private exceeded our agreement. I couldn't help myself.

Chapter Eighteen



Almost at once there was a subtle change in our relationship. Business partners we might be, but equal partners, no. St. John assumed it was his privilege to make the major decisions, and I thought it prudent not to challenge this notion . . . yet.

Since it was essential that he have the right to provide me with money to meet the taxes by the day they fell due, we should be married within a week, he informed me, and we'd best be off to Welkin at once for blood tests and the license.

"Blood tests!" I said.

"Superfluous in our case," he agreed, "but the law makes no exception, I believe, nor do I care to ask for one."

So away we went to Welkin, where a roly-poly doctor wrapped that rubber tightly around my arm and slid an enormous needle in. Then he did St. John, who watched as indifferently as if it were a mosquito. And then we went around to the Town Hall and filled in all about ourselves, and I was interested to see his mother's name had been Marie Gaultier and his father's first name was Pierre.

As we went down the steps I felt unaccountably shy, and for want of anything else to say, "Are you French?" I said.

"I'm of French-Canadian descent, if that's what you mean."

"I thought St. John was an English name," I said.

"He changed the spelling. He got tired of being called 'Saint Gene'—you know, as in 'genius'. He said if he spelled it J-o-h-n maybe the dumb Yanks would get it closer to his *vrai nom*, but he always softened it, like the French. I don't know why it mattered so much to him—he could scarcely write English, let alone French, which he could speak after a fashion but never learned to read." He let drop this information as casually as if he were remarking his father had had difficulty with calculus.

"But didn't he get any schooling?"

"All he needed, or thought he needed. Through fifth or sixth grade, I suppose, though I don't know for sure."

"But the law says you have to go through high school!"

"What the law says never troubled my father very much," St. John said with a faint smile. "And it's not easy to catch up with a lumberman's family; they move around too much. My father worked in the woods, the same as his father before him."

But not you, I thought. How did you escape?

The next morning I was pleased to see we appeared to

be back on the old basis, St. John looking at me, not through me, and talking to me over a friendly breakfast as if I was really there.

"Starting the day after one applies for the license," he observed in a tone which might be described as 'ten years married', "there's a five-day wait, which brings us to Monday. Can we choose that day, you are wondering, or do we have to wait until midnight strikes? I would have asked, but I was reluctant to appear under any—ah—conventional urgency."

"Tuesday will be time enough," I said stiffly. "The taxes don't have to be paid until Wednesday the thirty-first. 'I thought, dear God, how mercenary that sounds! Which reminds me,' I went on hurriedly, "are we getting married in the church Gam was buried from? Or are you Catholic, or something?"

"Distantly something," he said. "Once removed. And therefore we are not getting married in church. I assumed you understood this was to be a relationship that would self-destruct after an appropriate length of time. Catholic marriages are the very devil of a job to erase."

"Very well, the town clerk it is," I said bleakly. "For this kind of marriage, a contract, not a covenant, what difference does it make? As long as we treat each other with consideration—that's the main thing." I swallowed hard. "It's understood, then," I added awkwardly, "that we'll each go our own way."

"Naturally," he said. "I would not presume to notice, let alone question, your goings and comings, and I expect you to grant me the same courtesy in return."

"I mean," I said, my face burning, "you aren't to—to act l-like a husband, or expect m-me to act like a—a wife—"

"My dear Mrs. Milne, I thought we had settled all that. If by those stammered circumlocutions you are trying to convey that we are not to have sexual intercourse, what on earth do you think I conceive the phrase 'in name only' to mean? This is a marriage purely for appearance and to avoid you losing your inheritance—I thought that went without saying."

"Nothing," I said huskily, "goes without saying. I want it in writing."

"Good God, what an excellent idea!" he said heartily.

"A marriage contract—yes, I would feel *much* safer! Whatever was I thinking of, to plunge into this without protecting myself? Complete with escape clause, don't you think? The marriage to be dissolved at the request of either party at the end of five years. Splendid!"

"Five years! I was thinking more like one year—once I get the furniture from the River House I can be on my own!"

"There can be no question of a shorter marriage," St. John said coldly. "You may be inured to the implications suggested by an excessively brief union, but I am not. My first lasted five years—let us say that is my minimum standard. Besides, as you once mentioned with such engaging frankness, I will be putting some thousands into this house, and I want a fair return for my money. One year's freedom to come and go as I please would hardly repay me."

Dear God, what a gold digger I must seem! "Very well," I said, "if we can stand each other for one year, I suppose we can for five. But I wish somebody else had to know of our agreement. Do we have to have an outsider draw it up? Couldn't we do it ourselves? After all, Gam wrote her own Will—"

"I can't think of a better reason not to," he said dryly. "Obviously we can't use Mansfield. I'll have my lawyers do it. They have no personal stake in whether or not you get full title here, and I don't give a damn about their opinion of me. I'll draw up a rough draft and you look it over for additions or deletions."

While I busied myself digging weeds from the terrace, he wrote diligently at the trestle table. In less than fifteen minutes he was back. "This ought to do it, I think."

It was not so much a rough draft of a contract as a listing of points to be included, and as I read them over, my feelings were, as they say, mixed.

Everything in this contract must meet one test, he began: that it further, or at least not negate, the terms of the Will and of the Letter of Conditions of Martha Stark Carson which pertain to the legacy of Emelie Carson Milne, soon to be Emelie Carson St. John, so that she (Emelie) shall qualify in five years' time as sole and full heir to Tamarack. The marriage to be a civil contract, subject to uncontested dissolution at the request of either party at

the end of five years; no alimony to be paid either. Furthermore, "All my worldly goods I thee endow" to be omitted from the ceremony; what each brings to this union to remain his or her own. The marriage to be in name only, i.e. not consummated, this to be kept secret between J and E, who are to lead separate lives but so conduct themselves in public as to appear to have a conventional marriage, and both in public and in private to treat each other with the respect and courtesy due a valued business partner.

So far so good, I thought, gratified, and read on:

"Item: J to furnish E with an adequate household allowance—" there was a blank here, presumably for a suitable sum to be written in—"which is to cover food, household supplies, personal needs, etc., with augmentation as nec. for taxes, utilities, insurance, and other routine expenses.

"Item: J to decide order and extent of repairs and restoration, E to supervise same and have final say over specifications, etc., J to have veto over any aspect (financial or aesthetic) of which he disapproves—"

"No!" I was shocked as I was startled. "You can't possibly veto anything—Gam stipulated very clearly that I am to have full responsibility for all repairs!"

"This in no way undercuts that requirement," he said levelly. "I'm to say merely what *can't* be done; you of course have the final say on what can. I don't think it's unreasonable of me to expect to have some way to rein you in, if necessary."

"Yes, well, I think you should be able to, financially," I said reluctantly. "That's only fair. But that 'aesthetic' is way out of bounds! After all, it's my house!" I bit my lip. "I'm going to be living here for the rest of my life—at least I hope so—"

"Very well, I yield on 'aesthetic' insofar as it pertains to repairs and redecoration," he said smoothly. "As you say, they will be permanent, and who knows if your next husband could afford to change things to suit you? But I insist on the right to say nay to purchases of furniture. For example, I detest spindly chairs—"

"So do I!"

"—or the use of any kind of antique junk whose sole value is its age. It may be your house—in the legal sense

of course it is, unquestionably—but I have no intention of spending the next five years feeling like a damn paying guest. Hence the final specification in our contract.”

He was regarding me with that cool, subtly challenging look that I was beginning to dread—as if I were some kind of target, something he had in his sights and would bring down when it suited him. In some confusion, I sought the last item on his list:

“E to recognize that as long as this marriage exists J is master at Tamarack, just as if this were in fact the conventional marriage it purports to be, and she is to run the household accordingly: i.e. cater to J’s whims and tastes, regard his suggestions as requests and his requests as orders, and in every way possible conduct the domestic life of the house so as to further his work.”

Dear *God*, I thought incredulously, he calls this a description of a *conventional* marriage? ‘Victorian’ is hardly the word . . . ‘patriarchal’—I didn’t know *what* to call it! A partnership in which I was to be the very, very junior partner, kowtowing to the head of the firm, backing out of the room, no doubt, addressing him as *sir* or *milord*! ‘Cater to his whims and tastes’—it was this that I most resented, I realized. How could I explain—how could I make him *see* it just wasn’t fair that I should have to make all the concessions and he none? I couldn’t help it if it *was* his money! Though in all fairness I had to admit it would very likely cost St. John a handsome sum to restore Tamarack to good repair. I had no idea how much of a sacrifice this would be for him. What if he did have a dinner jacket and more than one suit—what did that signify? Perhaps he was one of those men who are beggared by alimony payments. But those would have stopped when Merrill remarried . . .

And then I almost crowed aloud. He thinks he’s so smart! He thinks he’s thought of everything!

“Well, Mr. St. John,” I said, “you’ve left out one thing, and I’m truly amazed you should have overlooked it. *What if I die before the five years are up?* Right away you’ll have to leave Tamarack, won’t you? All that money you’ve spent on taxes and repairs and everything—it’ll just be down the drain, won’t it? Gordon and Merrill ought to have to reimburse you!” He was staring at me as

if I were speaking some bizarre foreign tongue. "You ought to put in a clause to cover this!"

"My God! Must you braid your own noose? Do try not to be hopelessly naive! What if I needed money? Or merely changed my mind? 'Tough luck, Emelie—I'd like my investment back!'"

"Oh, don't be silly," I said, adding stubbornly, "if I were dying it would make me so *mad* to think of them as good as pocketing your money!"

He grinned. "Sorry. Not even to spare you such poignant regrets am I willing to yield my enviable position: I am the one person who would not benefit in any way from your death. Not only would this be useful in allaying the natural suspicions of the police in case of your untimely demise, but it ought to put things on a more healthy basis between us while you are still alive. The marriage contract protects you against every unpleasantness on my part except murder, and as to that, bear in mind I cannot inherit Tamarack—the Will rules me out, remember?"

But your child could . . . What devil popped the thought into my brain I do not know. I dropped my eyes, and (as was becoming a habit with me) prayed he could not read my mind. However, he must have caught some echo of this notion, for his next remarks were not a complete *non sequitur*.

"You're right—there is one point I've overlooked: the possibility you might become pregnant by a lover. There ought to be a clause covering such a contingency, perhaps in that section on 'living separate lives!'"

"You dare—you just *dare* put anything like that in there and I won't sign it!" I choked. "What do you take me for?"

"I take you for a woman, and therefore vulnerable to inconvenient biological repercussions. I think it only fair you should know that in my zeal to uphold that secrecy clause I will not go so far as to accept responsibility for any little stranger you might introduce into this household."

I was trembling with rage. "You just let your lawyers put something like that in and you can pack your things and get out! I'll not *tolerate* such insults! I'll not sign anything that makes me out—that makes me out to be—"

"A free woman?" he said helpfully.

"I mean it!"

"Very well. As long as you understand what my reaction would be, I see no need to formalize it in writing. I'll go into Welkin and phone the gist of this to my lawyers. Two copies should be plenty, I think. One apiece, and no spares to float around and fall into the wrong hands." He looked at me critically, a little smile of what might have been approval hovering on his lips. "You ought to get mad oftener," he remarked dispassionately. "It gives you a good color for a change." He started out, checked, and turned back. "I almost forgot. What size ring do you wear?"

"I—I can't remember." I could feel whatever color I had draining from my face. It was as if, incredibly, for the first time I realized what it was I was planning to do. I was going to wear this man's ring . . . I was going to assume his name . . . Call our agreement what we liked, I was going to *marry* him. . . .

"If you take that ring off, I can measure your finger," he said, very matter-of-fact.

"Why don't you just use this one?" I was twisting off the circle of diamonds Bard had chosen. "It seems a pity to waste it."

He didn't answer; he was concentrating on marking exactly where the paper overlapped. Then he raised his eyes. Seen this close, they were not really black but very dark brown; it was the deep set, the thick lashes, the heavy brows like hawks' wings that made them appear black. He was still holding my left hand, and his grip, I realized, had tightened.

"Mrs. Milne," he said quietly, "if we are to live in this house in relative peace, you will have to curb your tongue. Don't let the fact that I agree to a mock marriage mislead you. I do not wish to be reminded in any way that my wife-that-is-no-wife was once another man's." He released my hand.

"D-dear God," I said through trembling lips, "I was j-just trying to save you money!"

"What makes you think I have a nature so parsimonious I would not object to the sight of another man's ring on my wife's hand?"

"But no one would *know*!"

"I would know," he said. "And you would know." His

eyes held mine, and I read anger and dislike in their depths. Then, more gently: "Does it make you so unhappy to take it off?"

I shook my head. "No, I really don't mind all that much."

For some reason it was the wrong thing to say. "I see," he said, and I fancied there was disgust in his tone.

We were married on Tuesday, the thirtieth of October.

The day was clear and cold with a fitful wind; I wore my black dress and my good coat. We had gone in early, when the east road was still striped with shadows. On the healthy elms a remnant of foliage clung like cobwebs, but the dying elms were bare.

The marriage contracts had been in the mail on Monday. All seemed in order, even though everything sounded terribly cold and calculating to me, spelled out in legal language that way. Now we signed the contracts before the town clerk (a broomstick of a man with a dreadful asthmatic gasp) and he and his assistant signed both copies as witnesses. And then the town clerk took out a leather-bound volume stamped in gold *Vt. Justice and Public Officer*, and after a short delay (the town constable had to be summoned for a second witness) he told St. John to take my right hand in his, and he did so. And then the clerk said very solemnly, gasping for breath after each phrase: "*Justin Delacroix St. John, you now take the woman whose right hand you hold, to be your lawfully wedded wife; hereby engaging to love, cherish, and protect her, in sickness and in health; and that, forsaking all other women, you will provide for and support her, and will treat her, in all things, as the laws of the State require, so long as you both shall live. Do you thus covenant and promise?*"

I don't know what St. John expected; I had not anticipated anything so solemn, so basic, or so binding. There was an infinitesimal pause, and then St. John said firmly, "I do."

Then the clerk turned to me and began, "*Emelie Carson Milne—*" and I suddenly thought it was a terrible farce I was compounding here; it was a mockery. I was debasing something fine and good . . . I was miming something sacred. These were nothing like the hollow

terms we had so cleverly drawn up for our contract; these were *real*: this was a real marriage—

"Say, 'I do,'" the clerk prompted, a wheeze rattling his throat.

I wet my lips. "I do," I said faintly. I felt dizzy.

"*Therefore * by virtue of the authority * vested in me * by the statutes of this * state—*" the effort it was costing the clerk was painful to watch—"in the presence * of these witnesses I do now pronounce * and declare you to be * husband and wife." He paused expectantly, looking from one to the other of us.

Wasn't it over? Weren't we finished? I glanced at St. John, who reached for my left hand and put a ring—a quite different ring, a wide gold band very plain and simple—on my finger, and then he bent and kissed me. Tears stung my eyes. It's been two years, I thought, since I've felt a man's lips on mine.

As we went down the steps of the Town Hall, the vows we had just taken echoed in my mind. *So long as you both shall live . . .* Did St. John, too, think on this?

"Oh, by the way, you keep this," he said, handing me the Certificate of Marriage. "It concerns you more than it does me." From his composure no one would imagine I was anything more to him than I had been half an hour ago—and I wasn't, of course.

We went across to the bank and he opened an account for me. Then we went back to the Town Hall, and it turned out the town treasurer's office was in her home. We drove out to one of those rambling clapboarded houses on the road to the cemetery, and it seemed to me it was a long, long time since I had walked out that way to thank Gam for trusting Tamarack to me; it seemed to me I wasn't that Emelie any more, and of course I wasn't: that had been Emelie Milne; it was Emelie St. John who was signing the check. "Write on it 'Property taxes in full, Tamarack,' and the date," St. John directed, and I did so, my hand shaking a little, for I was ransoming Tamarack, wasn't I?

Then we went back to the bank. As I was signing to get into my safety deposit box, St. John handed me my copy of our marriage contract, remarking that he'd mail his to his lawyers.

"There's plenty of room for yours in here," I said.

"No, Emelie," he said, as if to a child.

So I put in only my copy, and the Certificate of Marriage, and the receipted tax bill. As I shut away the box behind its thick door, I thought exultantly, *I have a house, a shelter. Like a wild thing, I have a den, where I can defend myself, where I can be safe.* Safe against what? Safe against the dark that creeps across the world when the sun goes down? No, I thought: safe from the darkness within, the loneliness, the not belonging anywhere . . .

"Let's have lunch," he suggested, and we started across the Green. When we were out of earshot of any passers-by, he said, "If you would stop and think for just one moment, you'd know I don't want my copy of our agreement in your box where you could get at it and destroy it, should you see any need to, nor do you want yours where I could. And don't tell me you trust me. You don't, or you would never have insisted on everything in writing, signed, sealed, and witnessed."

We crossed the rest of the Green in silence.

He spent the entire meal (we ate at the Inn) instructing me on what he wanted me to do and how he wanted me to do it. I was to hire a cleaning woman, he said, and when I protested I didn't need one, he remarked that he did not wish to argue over each request he made of me; I would do well to bear in mind I had that very morning signed a contract which clearly stated he was to be master at Tamarack for the duration of our marriage. I was to hire a cleaning woman, he repeated, whose immediate duties would be to tidy up after the carpenters and plasterers, the glaziers and painters. "It's nonsense to say you'll do the cleaning up," he said. "If word got out you were doing such work, no one would believe our marriage is genuine, least of all Merrill, who knows full well I don't confuse the duties of a wife with those of scrub woman or cook."

"I—I don't know how to go about hiring household help!"

"Mansfield should know how it's done here—phone him and ask."

I flushed. "I haven't told anyone our plans."

"I'll tell him, if you like. Or we can let him read about it in tomorrow's *Horizon*."

I was taken aback. "You sent a notice to the paper?"

"Oh, was that bad form? I wanted to make sure the changed situation is known to all interested parties."

Like Merrill . . . "Very well, I'll ask him," I said.

As he enumerated what the workmen should do first, I was reassured to note a strong similarity between his listing and my 'survey'. At least I wouldn't have to argue essential repairs.

"This may run to quite a lot of money, Mr. St. John," I said. "Could you give me an idea of how much you care to spend?"

"I'll discuss costs with the men before you hire them. Oh, and by the way—" he waited while the course was cleared and the next placed before us—"I shall call you 'Emelie' no matter what you choose to call me, but if for any reason your tongue refuses to wrap itself around 'Justin' you can always fall back on 'Dahling'—that doesn't commit you to anything nowadays." His eyes were on his meat, which he was carving with commendable finesse. "If your 'Mr. St. John' is a defensive gesture designed to keep me at arm's length, I assure you it is not necessary. I shall stick to the letter of our contract, and as far as I am concerned, 'in name only' puts a ban on the preliminaries as well. No impertinent hugs, no snatched kisses." He smiled briefly.

We drove home, and the afternoon passed much as usual. I was getting supper (again as usual) when I heard the sound of a car. For one panicky moment I was afraid we were going to be favored with another visit from Merrill, but it was a battered VW that coughed to a halt at the foot of the knoll, and Gordon Fenwick who clambered out and labored up the slope.

"Hullo!" Gordon affected surprise. "Didn't know *you* were still here! Long time no see!"

"Come in, won't you, Fenwick?" Justin said pleasantly. "We're about to dine. Will you join us?"

"No, no, unbidden guest is unwelcome pest!" When I looked at him sharply: "Hullo, Emelie. How you doin'? Head above water?"

"Yes, thank you." I slid the frying pan off the fire; it had commenced to smoke. I did not echo Justin's invitation.

Gordon Fenwick was gazing around the room with frank curiosity—prurient curiosity, I thought as his eyes

lit on my narrow cot and then slid speculatively over me. "I'm looking for Pentacost Jones, actually," he said. "I kinda thought he'd be here. Merrill said he's workin' for you, Emelie."

"He was repairing the roof, but it's all done."

"I got a buyer for his lumber. You interested in selling any? You prob'ly can use some ready cash about now, I bet."

"Who couldn't?" I said lightly. "But I'm not going to sell any of Tamarack's trees, Gordon. I couldn't if I wanted to, anyway—not for the five years I'm on probation."

"I didn't know Pentacost was thinking of cutting timber," Justin said with a frown. "How does he plan to get it out? His freehold is surrounded by Tamarack's land. There's a right of way, of course, but it's only to foot traffic."

"Well, I haven't put the proposition to him yet," Gordon said. "Depends on what he's got. He's a slippery fella—never where he says he'll be. You got any kind of map, Emelie, that shows what's his and what's yours?"

I shook my head. "Why don't you ask Dixon Mansfield?"

"Yeah, I'll do that. Say, about that right of way, Emelie, assumin' I do make a deal—think we can work something out?"

"I don't know," I said slowly. I hated the idea—chain saws snarling, trucks groaning and straining, the woods no longer at peace. "I'll have to think about it."

"Well, that's a bridge I'll cross when I get there." Gordon peered into the darkness beyond the open door. "Helluva lonesome spot, isn't it? Gonna be awful lonesome for you here, Emelie. You leavin' soon, Justin?"

"Good God, I hope not!" Justin said easily. "Emelie and I were married today."

Gordon Fenwick's mouth dropped open, and he stared in stupefaction first at Justin, then at me. Something in his expression—some quality of lecherous incredulity—made me flush and look away.

"Well, congratulations!" he said, a remark aimed, I realized, at me, the bride. "I guess from now on all your problems will be little ones!" He laughed, to make sure we

got the joke. "I got to hand it to you, Emelie—you sure don't let the moss grow under your feet!"

"I fail to see what concern it is of yours, Fenwick," Justin said icily. "Or why you feel compelled to comment."

"Well, *you* sure kept quiet about it, and Emelie—" he glanced at me, his face an unhealthy red—"blood's thicker'n water, but you didn't give the good news to the family, did you? Merrill, f'r instance. I saw her today—she never said a word—"

"'Family!'" Justin said, a scarcely discernible tremor in his voice betraying his rage. "I owe her no advance confidences, nor you, nor anyone. If it matters, there'll be an announcement in tomorrow's *Horizon*. Our marriage concerns only two people—Emelie and myself. Spare me your innuendos, Fenwick, in my own house!"

"*Your* house," Gordon said thickly. "Aren't you kinda jumpin' the gun, Justin? It isn't even Emelie's yet, far as I know!"

"True, in a sense—she won't have title to Tamarack for five years, and I don't now and never will. Yet it *is* my house, Fenwick, and I'll thank you to watch your tongue and your manners under my roof!"

When he was gone, I slid the bolt fast, but I found no comfort in the gesture. Then I served up the ruined supper and for a while we ate in silence. I felt tired, depressed, weighed down by I didn't know what.

"Does he need money?" I said.

"Gordon? Desperately, I imagine."

"I meant Pentacost. Why else would he be selling his trees?"

He shrugged. "We have only Fenwick's word that he's even thinking about it. After all, why should he? He's a rich man." He was smiling faintly. "So am I rich. You, on the other hand, Emelie Carson St. John, are poor. So is Fenwick. And so, God knows, is Merrill. If your means surpass your wants, you're rich. If your wants surpass your means, you're poor."

"Charles Dickens," I said. I sipped coffee. "Why do you suppose he came, actually? He must have known it would be too dark to locate Pentacost. Perhaps he thought you'd already left, and I'd be an easy mark for whatever scheme he had in mind."

"I'm flattered," Justin said with a thin smile, "that you think my presence an obstacle to any kind of skulduggery, or would appear so to Fenwick. One might almost think you trust me."

The time to trust anybody, Emelie—I could hear my father say—is before the evidence is in. I jumped up and retrieved the Cohabitation Contaminates letter from the volume of Browning.

"To begin with, I *trust* you didn't write this!"

He held the letter as if he thought it might come off on his hand. "When did you get this?"

"Thursday. I—I'm afraid I burnt the envelope. It had been mailed out of Welkin the day before."

"I take it you assumed this mischief was my work? That's why you didn't show it to me then?"

"It seemed out of character," I said in a low voice.

"I am amazed you married me," he said quietly. "Naturally you would suspect I wrote this—it's just the sort of thing I would do, isn't it? For I know how you lust after Tamarack, don't I? It's been in your eyes ever since you set foot in this house. Yet I know, too, that you're hellishly conventional. A *proper* lady, oh, God, yes! So I'd be confident that a good strong nudge like this would maneuver you into marriage. Yes, I can see I'm the obvious suspect. What clears my name now?"

I was ten times a fool to have showed him the letter.

"Necessity," I said. "I *have* to believe you didn't write it."

"Why do you have to believe it? Because otherwise it raises such awkward quesetions? For example, is your husband a scoundrel who tried to shame you into his arms? Figuratively speaking, of course. What a discomfitting thought to take to bed with you on your wedding night!"

I stared at him as sometimes one stares, hypnotized, into flames. "*Did* you, Justin?"

"If I did, would I say yes? And if I said no, you wouldn't believe me, would you?"

Chapter Nineteen



I did not exactly welcome, a week or so later, the intrusion (via Ken Kendall's cab) of Dixon Mansfield's choice of cleaning woman, a dough-faced female poured into stretch slacks who said her name was Tessie Locksmith and she herself never paid no Social Security but if I wanted I could pay the whole thing, it would be all right with her.

"Well, Tessie," I said doubtfully, "why don't you come for this week and we'll see how we get along?"

She expected we'd get along all right, she said, as she wasn't picky about the places she worked. I explained that her chief duty would be to keep the house as orderly as possible. The plasterers were already demolishing the damaged ceilings upstairs, so the kitchen floor would need frequent mopping and the paper 'carpeting' taped over the other floors constant sweeping. We had no electricity and therefore no labor-saving machines—was she willing to work under such circumstances? She guessed so, she said sullenly. Well, then, when could she start? She allowed as how she could start now, if somebody'd drive her home when she was done. I said I'd be glad to, and waved Ken off. Suggesting she start with the kitchen, I introduced her to my mop and pail.

I was, I realized, jealous of Tessie's presence. It wasn't that I liked drudgery but that I disliked the idea of another woman sharing the care of Tamarack. I knew I was being illogical, now a chronic state with me, I feared, and never more so than when I resented the other invaders overhead and underfoot: they at least left a wake of improvements, of flaws erased and decay defeated. Still, they too—these carpenters and plasterers and masons and plumbers—were trespassers here.

No electricians: I didn't want to be dependent on any umbilical cord strung through the woods. St. John sug-

gested a generator, similar to but larger than the one the workmen had set up to run their power tools. The throbbing would be discernible, I said, even if, as he further suggested, it were set up in the barn; besides, that still would mean wires stretched to the house, and to me, part of Tamarack's beauty was the way it stood alone in clean, unscratched air. The wires could be underground, he said. No doubt an excessively expensive arrangement, I replied repressively, and vetoed the idea.

I was troubled by this seeming unwillingness of his to take any financial shortcuts. Butternut to repair split paneling could not be kiln-dried but must come from a house without central heating where it was air-dried for a hundred years. The glaziers could not use clear modern glass but must seek out a source contemporaneous to the restive panes in the west wing. I could only hope St. John wouldn't announce, in a month or two, that he'd used up all his savings.

Tessie had had enough of mopping and sweeping by the time he returned with the car, and I was glad of an excuse to escape the house. When I had deposited her on her doorstep, I went on into Welkin, where I paid a call on Dixon Mansfield to thank him for locating Tessie. Then I parked the Audi in front of a dress shop and treated myself to a half-hour of browsing. Calculating that by now the carpenters would be unplugging their sanders and preparing to quit for the day, I was about to leave when Merrill swept into the shop.

"Emelie!" she cried, extending both hands. "I'm overjoyed at the news! What are you doing, selecting your trousseau?"

"No, I—I've just been looking," I stammered.

"The prices are wicked, aren't they?" she said, in blithe disregard of the shopkeeper hovering in the background. "Never mind, Justin is the most generous of husbands—" she gave me a ravishing smile—"in public, that is. So let me give you a little tip: if you coax him to go shopping with you, it saves storms later! Oh, I'm so glad for you both," she chattered on. "Justin needs a woman like you—you fit so perfectly into his scheme of things!"

It was the Tamarack visit all over again: a spate of words, a pretense of close friendship, and complete disregard of the likelihood of being overheard.

"Poor Emelie!" Merrill laughed. "You look so skeptical—one would think you're having second thoughts already! It's that lordly manner of his, isn't it? Perhaps you'll get used to it, thought *I* never could. Now be sure to tell him how *relieved* I am he found another woman willing to marry him! Oh, and before I forget—Gordon is selling me the River House! Justin will probably rage and fume—he never did like me to have anything he didn't give me himself! Now *you*, Emelie, I knew would be glad, because it upsets you to have done anything the teeniest bit unfair, doesn't it? And there I was, without a home in Welkin—"

"If you mean Tamarack, it's what Gam wanted, after all," I said, disconcerted. Did she think we were invisible and inaudible?

"Yes, but the River House will be practically empty when you take out all that furniture! You wouldn't consider making me a price? I'd be saving you the cost of moving it and of selling it later—it hardly suits Tamarack, does it? So exaggerated!"

If Merrill wanted those vast Victorian pieces, they must be more valuable than I suspected. But if Gam had wanted her to have that furniture she would have left it to her: Merrill was the one prospective customer I was honor-bound not to consider.

I said, "I'm sorry—whatever Gam wanted me to have, if I possibly can, I'm going to keep."

She laughed lightly. "Careful, Emelie—it may cost you more than you ought to pay—or has it already?"

We must have given the shopkeeper a luscious earful, I thought, clashing the gears of the Audi as I started for home. Merrill Mansfield St. John Broome may not care what sort of gossip she inspires, but Emelie Carson of Tamarack cares very much! If you're planning to live anywhere for the rest of your entire life, you *have* to care, I thought angrily.

"She married for money, I hear. Needed it to hang onto that house old Miss Martha left her, they say. No, she didn't need very much—but not every woman puts a high price on herself, ain't that right? Not that it makes a speck of difference . . ."

In Ransom's Bridge the children were huddled out of the wind, watching two men erecting plastic-streamered

markers to warn the snowplow away from guardrail or culvert. As if the winter promised to be one long glittering tournament! Turning onto the hill road, I twisted the dial of the heater up a notch.

"They're always mighty cool and polite to each other, like they just met—all la-de-da and 'May I speak to you a moment, please?' She's something out of the deep freeze, I bet. Prob'ly froze her first husband to death . . ."

I had arrived at the foot of the knoll, where my way was blocked by a truck loaded with fine-crushed stone; a crawler-tractor was growling along the carriage drive, re-defining its curves. I stalked into the house, where I found St. John and the carpenters contemplating the curving stair.

I said distantly, "May I speak to you a moment, please?"

Urbanity itself, he followed me into the kitchen.

"I don't remember authorizing any repairs to the drive." Try as I would, I could not keep my voice steady.

"Surely you do not object?"

"But you *know* such things are supposed to be my decision! Gam said I must be in charge of all repairs! What are you trying to do—lose me Tamarack?" It was a wild remark that I instantly regretted, but what is said is said: I could not call it back.

"To what purpose, may I ask?" he said icily.

"Perhaps—" until that moment, I would have sworn I had no such notion in my head—"perhaps to offer it to Merrill!"

"There is no need to be half-witted." His face tightened. "I am not trying to 'lose you Tamarack'. Had I any such notion, all I need do is leave you here to fend for yourself—you wouldn't last a week. I apologize for neglecting to mention fixing the drive; I thought it obvious it urgently needed doing. You, of course, will be paying the bill. That is," he added cuttingly, "yours is the hand that will write the check."

All he need do is 'overlook' the stipulation that I pay the bills and pay them himself, I thought in despair. And let Merrill know he had, and leave the rest to her. That fool marriage contract said I was the one who must pay them, but how could I make him stick to it if he chose not to? If I tried to enforce a single one of its stipulations, our

marriage would be revealed as a fake and a fraud, and Merrill would be getting Tamarack (I could hear Gordon say it) on Martha's silver platter.

Women really don't have any armor except their own brains, I thought, and said awkwardly, "I'm truly sorry for what I said about Merrill. I suppose she was on my mind. I—I ran into her today in Welkin. She said she was overjoyed at our marriage."

"Overjoyed?" he said in a curious voice.

I wished fervently I had the gift of glib invention. "Yes, she wanted me to tell you how glad she is you—you found another woman willing to marry you. I—dear God! how that sounds—"

"I'll try not to let it go to my head," he said dryly.

I went on hurriedly, "She's buying the River House, she said. Gordon is glad to sell it, I guess."

"*God damn it to hell.*" Though he spoke softly, his eyes glittered and an ugly color stained his face. I stared at him, perplexed and frightened, and his expression softened. "It's all right, Emelie—I'm not angry with you. I don't blame you for wincing at Merrill's darts—I know how their venom stings." He shrugged. "Or I did. By now I ought to be immune. Why didn't you tell me you had errands in Welkin? You could have come with me."

"I had to take Tessie Locksmith home."

"Dixon's scrub woman? Are you satisfied with her? I thought she was a leaner myself. You know—props herself on the furniture when you're talking to her."

"She's all right," I said.

"Well, I won't have you playing chauffeur—Kendall can fetch her back and forth. I'll arrange it tomorrow when I'm on the trail of the painters. I want them to start in the pantry. You might get your Ragdoll to washing those shelves—they're too grimy to be painted as is." He was regarding me with an expression I couldn't read. "Are we friends, Emelie? I'm not a villain, conniving to do you out of your inheritance?"

I hesitated, then: "No," I said, "I guess you—you aren't."

The smile left his eyes. "I would wish you had been able to say that with more conviction," he said quietly.

Lest it reflect on Mr. Mansfield, I felt obliged to conceal

the fact that Tessie was more hindrance than help. She was an indifferent sweeper; I would follow her and get into the corners she 'overlooked'. She was a mopper who left puddles unwiped; when she was done I would just happen to go in, sponge in hand, and wipe dry the wet streaks. So when I heard the baby wailing, one morning when Justin had taken his knapsack and gone out, my first thought was how to conceal from him this incredible imposition she had foisted upon me; my second (and, I confess, somewhat belated) response was of pity and concern.

I had come into the central hallway and I could clearly hear the child wailing—a very young baby, from the sound. At first I thought it might be in one of the north bedrooms, but when I went to the foot of the stairs, it seemed it could be as far away as the Hogarth room. Exasperated, I sought out Tessie where she was idly steering a push broom across the east wing, and I said, "Tessie, you shouldn't leave your baby alone upstairs—it would be much safer as well as warmer in the kitchen."

Tessie turned on me a face utterly blank.

"It's *crying*," I said. "Never mind all this—go look after your baby!"

"Not me," said Tessie warily. "I didn't bring no baby here."

"Well, somebody did!" I said.

"I don't even *have* no baby, mine are all growed. So you can't say it's mine—you can't blame me! Besides," she added cannily, "I didn't see no baby anywheres!"

"Well, I heard it," I said.

"I didn't." She was staring at me as if (absurdly) I frightened her.

Why did she deny it? I wouldn't fire her because she had to bring her baby—what kind of monster did she take me for? (And why was it that the Tessies of this world get to have the babies, anyway?) Of course, perhaps it wasn't hers—one of the workmen could have had a family crisis and was doubling as babysitter: unlikely, but possible.

"Never mind all this sweeping," I said shortly. "We'd best get on with the pantry. The painters come tomorrow."

I went upstairs. Nowhere was there a baby or any sign

there had been one. I could not have imagined it—the sound had been unmistakable. Puzzled, I went down the pantry stairs to the kitchen. Could the sound have come from here? Well, if it had, there was no baby here now.

I could hear Tessie crashing down her equipment in the pantry. She appeared in the doorway. "Here's where you want it mopped?"

I tried to be patient. "No, Tessie, I want the woodwork scrubbed. I told you, the painters are coming tomorrow."

"I don't wash no woodwork. I mop and I sweep, what I was hired to do."

I said incredulously, "You don't wash woodwork?"

"No, *ma'am*—that's a job for a man."

I couldn't tell if the work was beyond her or beneath her.

I had intended to lend a hand with the scrubbing, but I had not expected to have to do it all myself. After working for more than an hour, I had scarcely a fourth of the shelves done when I heard St. John on the terrace. Before I could hide my basin and cloths, he had come in.

"What are you up to? Didn't Ragdoll come?"

"She came," I said loftily, "but she doesn't do woodwork."

"She doesn't? May I ask why not?"

For some reason I was reluctant to repeat Tessie's exact words. "She says it's not what she was hired to do."

"Indeed? Well, I think in this instance I'd best do the firing, and in the future I'll do the hiring as well. Without, may I add, the benefit of Mansfield's help. Will you excuse me? I'd like to be done with this before Kendall gets here."

Ken and Tessie had gone and the workmen were in little clusters about the house, lunch boxes open and thermoses unfurled, when St. John and I sat down, as usual, at the trestle table. At first he said nothing further about my failure with Tessie but remarked he'd been thinking all along we ought to get that couple who worked for Martha—the Rowdons, wasn't it?—and now seemed as good a time as any; he had their address; he'd write them at once. Then: "Your Tessie has an odd way of trying to enlist one's sympathy. When I told her I thought we could get along just as well without her, she claimed she did *not* have a baby. I didn't know whether condolences or con-

gratulations were in order, and so I was—a rare state for me—at a loss how to reply, when she went on to allow as how she hadn't brung no baby here no matter what the missus said. Have you any idea what she was talking about?"

"Yes, I—that is, in a way." I flushed. "I—I could have sworn I heard a baby crying upstairs and I assumed it was Tessie's. When I went to check, there wasn't any baby there. Naturally," I added with an attempt at a laugh.

"It sounded so real you went to look? When was this?"

"I don't know—around the middle of the morning."

"It was geese, no doubt. I saw some huge V's going over."

I shook my head. "I know what a baby sounds like."

"Wind in the chimney, then," he smiled.

"There aren't any chimneys in the main hall," I said doggedly, "which is where I was when I heard it."

"The carpenters' radio?"

"No, they've been all done in the Hogarth room for days. Besides, there was nothing before or after—just all of a sudden the crying."

I hadn't been frightened when I heard the child, only outraged and perplexed. But now, as we ticked off the possibilities, somewhere deep within me I felt a lick of fear. It was like a small flame, no bigger than a candle . . .

"Have it your way, it was ghosts," he said cheerfully, and rose to get more coffee. "Now, about the Rowdons, assuming they'll come—" As he fell to discussing what sort of accommodations would be suitable—perhaps the grooms' quarters in the barn?—it was borne in on me that he was soberly considering replacing Tessie with not one but two servants, the highly trained and (I felt sure) superefficient Grace and William. To my protest that we didn't need a full-time cook and gardener, he replied he had something better to do than stoke the kitchen stove and scrub the pots and pans, and he assumed I did, too. As for William, he said, he could keep the wood boxes filled, light the fires in the morning and keep them burning throughout the day—

"Justin, I'm neither helpless nor lazy!" I cried. "I can pile the kindling and get a good fire going as well as any man!"

"If I could not afford to hire a manservant, I would

attend to the fires myself," Justin said harshly. "My mother carried firewood—that was shame enough for me. By God, my wife shall not!" And he shoved back his chair and left the room.

I sat there in a turbulence of emotion. I wished he would not expect me to guess at scars he kept hidden: it wasn't fair. Must I compensate for whatever his mother never had? (And why hadn't *he* carried firewood for her, if it bothered him so much?) I wished I didn't feel so shaken whenever he spoke roughly to me . . . though he seemed more angry at himself than at me.

The door flung open. "Geese! Geese, Emelie! My God, there's hundreds of them—come see!"

I raced onto the terrace. There they were—a scattering of ragged V's across the vastness of the cloud-streaked sky, their thin cries anxious, their thin lines trembling in that immensity of space. Gusts swept round the corners of the house, pounced on us in a flurry of leaves, billowed St. John's jacket, and lashed my hair across my eyes. Slowly the great birds passed overhead—slowly, slowly they ploughed the wind that rolled past them pure, cold, and clear, that glistened and shimmered with sunlight. As I watched, my elation was tempered with pity: they seem so free and yet they are not, I thought, no more than am I. They too are driven by some inner chemistry that is too strong to resist. They cannot choose to refuse: they must search for warmth, for open water, for safety for their young . . .

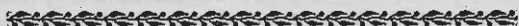
"The heron is gone." His eyes were on the dwindling V's. "We'll be getting snow—they're never far ahead of it."

Shivering, I moved closer to the protection of the house. The geese were into the sun now, were swallowed by light. I could still make out their voices, *wait-wait-wait-wait*—tremulous shreds of sound borne on the streaming wind—and I knew beyond all doubt that the cries I had heard earlier were no bird calling. I did not know the explanation: perhaps there was none. Yet it had been a child I heard.

Faint, thin, borne on the winds of memory, I could hear Gam: "There's things to be heard at Tamarack, Emelie—things to be heard . . ."

Had I heard another of them? I thought I had.

Chapter Twenty



October 4th, 1820

Ever since yesterday I am changed. I am as changed from what I was, a virtuous and faithful wife, as my wedding day changed me from maiden to matron. My silence was like a stroke of the executioner's axe: I am changed utterly.

Free will, my father said. Freedom to choose: wrong or right, sin or virtue, silence or speech. I chose silence.

"Mr. Carson, this man has presumed on your hospitality." I could have worded it so. "Mr. Carson, the limner has taken liberties." The words never occurred to me.

Constance and Mr. Carson returned together, she with her needlework, he for his whip, which he had forgotten.

When they came in, Mr. Rhys was stirring and stirring the colours on his palette, and I sat motionless, staring out the window towards the smoke house—someone had lit a fire in there already, I saw, for the smoke climbed out the hole into the clean air, mounting straight up towards heaven. As I am not like to do!

I am now left with the question: Why did I not speak?

Because, at the time, speech seemed betrayal? Betrayal of the man whose blue eyes spoke when his tongue was silent, who gentled Constance and made her smile, whose laughter spilled with mine. I must have done something, all unknowing, to lure him into so *carnal* a gesture. For he is a *good* man: this I know. Good, and kind, and brave, and decent. But very, very foolish!

October 6th, 1820

This morning whilst I was sitting with saintly expression (or as near to one as I am like to get) and Mr. Rhys painted zealously, Constance plying her needle, and when her fingers tired, reading to us from the *Horizon*, all this while the pigs (two) were being slaughtered over by

the big barn. We were near deafened by the squeals when one managed to get loose and went whipping past the window like a boulder crashing downhill, Mr. Ransom and two lads hard after it. Finally Mrs. R stepped out from the kitchen and lured the critter with a pail of mush, and the ropes were around its neck in a trice. Then more thrashings and smashings and gruntings and shoutings—truly it was exciting, but rather horrifying too, I thought. I could see Constance must think so as well, because she had become quite pale, and her eyes slewed round so that she was staring at her father's portrait.

"I wish nothing had to die," she said, almost in a whisper.

"The world would get monstrously crowded, then," I said. "Or else you would have to stop having anything born, and *that* wouldn't be nice, would it?"

"Die that way," Constance said. "All afraid, like that."

"No critter knows it's going to die, except us," Mr. Rhys said comfortingly. "The pig wasn't afraid so much as angry: it wanted to run about where it pleased, and not go back into its pen until it was good and ready."

"I think it knew, sir," Constance said. Her lip trembled. "I think pigs know—they're awful smart, Mr. Ransom says so."

I sought to distract her. "What does your sampler say, Constance? I see you have the text done. Can you read it?"

The child peered at her tiny stitches. "'Vice de-forms the fair-est face, But Vir-tue adds to every grace.' What are 'vice', New-Mother?"

"Not 'are'—'is'." I searched my mind how to explain.

"Oh, I thought it was more than one," she said doubtfully, frowning at her sampler. "Like 'mouse'—'mice', or 'louse'—'lice'."

"I don't think there is any such thing as a 'vouse'," I said in a strangled voice. Mr. Rhys was regarding Constance with a broad grin. (He *mustn't* laugh—I would be lost!) "It means sins, my darling. Doing wrong things. Not just naughtinesses, but really very *bad* things." I hoped she wouldn't ask me for examples. Had we been alone, I could have explained, or tried to, but in front of Mr. Rhys . . .

"You mean like breaking the Commandments?"

"Yes."

"It shows in your face? If I tell you an untruth, you would know it by looking in my *face*? It would be all twisted and—and marked?"

"No, I wouldn't, and it wouldn't," I said. "What that means—it means—" I looked helplessly at Mr. Rhys.

"It means if you are good, everything about you is nicer," Mr. Rhys said. "Your eyes are shinier, your smile sweeter—"

"If you are going to instruct my daughter in morality, sir, pray do not beg the question," said Mr. Carson from the doorway. He strolled in. "The text I chose for you, Constance, means simply that when you do evil, if you are a drunkard or a gambler or a lecher or a thief, your villainy will be plain to see: you will wear it on your face like a mask, a mask you are condemned not to take off. Everyone will know you for what you are—you will not be able to hide it. It will be writ in letters of fire on your forehead."

Mr. Rhys did not move or speak, nor could I.

Constance stared at her father for a long moment, and then—a miracle!—she smiled. "The world must be filled with good people then, sir," she said, "for I have never seen anyone with letters burnt across their face—have you?"

He stood, as always, ramrod straight, his hands clasped behind his back. He did not return her smile, but when he spoke, I realized she had—for the first time, perhaps, in her whole life—won his grudging approval. "Well said. When you are older, we shall discuss the matter further. The marks to which I refer, Constance, are discernible only to the eyes of our Maker. If Man could read them, it would simplify the work of the courts, wouldn't it?" And he transferred his gaze to my portrait, looking from it to me with narrowed eyes. Then: "Get on with it—continue, continue—" and he left the room.

So one good thing may have come of my presence here. If Constance's fear of her father is in truth somewhat lessened, perhaps it is my love that has given her courage. In a way this is not logical, for as her fear abates, mine increases. One would think there is a finite quantity of fear to be distributed among the female inhabitants of this

house, of which none is Mrs. Ransom's lot, for she goes home every night to her Levi and doesn't really live here. Constance and I must apportion out the total between us.

If this be true, and not merely fancy on my part, I would wish that the whole were mine, and none the child's.

October 8th

Mr. Carson joined us again this morning, and was full of suggestions how, in his view, the painting might be improved; he confessed himself disappointed in it, having expected more, he said, considering the unconscionable time it was taking; and did not Mr. Rhys consider the white of my gown most uncomplimentary to my colourless face? It was unfortunate the background was so dull a brown, he said; the soft green of my sitting room would have been more warming. And regard my expression: did it not strike the candid viewer as—to be frank—*blank*? I reflected that Mr. Rhys had painted only what he saw; it was unfair to blame the artist if the subject had wiped the slate of her mind clean of all mental exercise . . .

Mr. Rhys replied courteously: "Indeed you have the eye of an artist, sir. The white, coupled with this north light, truly has had a bleaching effect on Mistress Carson's complexion, which is very fair. And you are right to be impatient—" for Mr. Carson was regarding him with a scowl—"the work has taken me near double the time I anticipated. It is the detail, sir—all the elegant cordings and beadings: I could merely indicate these, to be sure, but I thought, so lovely a gown on so beautiful a lady deserves a rendering that aspires, at least, to do it—to do them both justice. But I see I have failed—"

"No, I do not consider the painting a failure," said Mr. Carson, frowning from it to me again. "It appears to be an accurate reflexion of what you see before you. No doubt the necessity of sitting for so long and of holding so still is wearing on a female."

"Sir, I agree it may be the fault of the pose. If Mistress Carson were to be standing, standing naturally, sir, as if about her duties as housewife—arranging flowers in a vase, shall we say, or perhaps admiring the view from a window—"

Mr. Carson said stiffly, "I cannot command another painting of my wife without some assurance that it will be a considerable improvement over those you have done."

"If you will allow it, sir, I shall do a quick sketch to show you what I have in mind. I can have it by this afternoon, and then before you leave you can either approve or reject it."

"As you wish. Now, Constance—" he turned his frown on the child—"where is your reader? Let me hear a paragraph or two."

"I am reading the newspaper," Constance said with pride.

"No harm in that," said Mr. Carson, seating himself, "as long as your stepmother approves what you read."

I recalled some of the items, and I quaked within.

Constance opened the paper, smoothed it flat, and in her clear childish voice read, "'Mowers and Churchill take pride in announcing they have English, Indian, American, and West Indian goods for sale, and will take in exchange butter at fourteen cents the pound, as well as cheese and dried apples.'" She looked up, hesitating, then, when he nodded, went on: "'Whereas my wife Susan has left my bed and board and refuses to live with me, I hereby caution the Public not to harbour her or trust—'"

"*Enough!*" roared Mr. Carson. He snatched the paper from the child's hands. "Madam, do you sit there lolly-gagging like a ninny while the child reads such blatant, shameless filth?"

I could only stammer that I felt sure she did not understand. "And if she questioned you? I would not have her know, madam, at her tender years, that any man could thus deliberately besmirch his name!" His nostril curled in scorn. "In the future, madam, you will see that my daughter reads *only* those books which I myself have chosen—nothing else, save, of course, the Bible."

I reflected that a prudent parent might also feel it incumbent upon himself to censor that book also, particularly the earlier pages, if he dreaded difficult questions. Something of this no doubt crossed my husband's mind, for he added, "I believe there are Biblical texts simplified for children. I shall obtain one. And since the child has been exposed to this—" he turned his frown in her direction

—"I shall explain the matter to you, Constance, lest in your innocent wondering about the unknown, you invent answers even more appalling than the truth. Do you understand to what sort of situation this advertisement refers?"

Poor Constance shook her head.

"This woman has left the house of her husband, no doubt in the company of a man not her husband. Do you understand so far?"

"Yes," Constance whispered. I doubted she did, but only a fool would say no.

"Her husband," Mr. Carson went on in a tone of great distaste, "instead of going after her and bringing her back, instead of finding the man who lured his wife away, instead of seeking him out and horsewhipping him, contents himself with whining and puling in public, blatantly advertising his wife's whoredom—as if the shame he so shamelessly bares does not reflect on him as well! Now do you understand?"

"Yes," said Constance even more faintly.

Leaving all three of us devoid of colour, Mr. Carson tucked the paper under his arm and strode out.

I thought it an astonishing topic to address to a four-year-old child. Obviously, however, my husband and I agreed on this if on nothing else: females, however tender their years, must be taught the essentials of life, however brutal. It is, ultimately, their only protection: this unblinking knowledge of the world.

October 11th

The 'bridal' portrait is done at last, and I am thankful. Mr. Carson is off to Montpelier, for tomorrow is the general election, and the Legislature sits immediately thereafter. He has approved the sketch, and I am to pose in my lime silk, in the south parlour where the light is warm. I am to stand by the window, which is to be open, at least while Mr. Rhys does the hair, which is to be flowing loose. This is a painting to be hung over the mantel in our bedroom, Mr. Carson said expressionlessly, therefore it would not be unseemly if I were to assume the stance of a nymph or goddess. Mr. Carson regretted it was too cold much of the time for us to be outside, on the terrace, and that the formal garden planned for construction in the

Spring was not yet done. If, however, Mr. Rhys were to include the autumnal foliage of the trees in the background as well as a section of the terrace seen through the window, the effect would be as if there were a garden already. In spite of his admitted lack of imagination, surely Mr. Rhys could conjure up a garden as seen through a window?

Mr. Rhys said he was certain he could.

Mr. Carson then settled Constance with her approved reader, summoned Mrs. Ransom, and informed her she could as well shell dry beans here in the parlour as in the kitchen. He would be off for Montpelier within the hour. "Mrs. Ransom, madam," said my husband to me, as if the other three in the room were stone deaf, "is to sit in here not as chaperone, to prevent mischief, but as witness that there is none. I trust you, madam," he informed me stiffly. "I do not trust men's tongues. The best way to put a stop to gossip is not to give it reason to start." He nodded to us all, and went out.

I was scarlet. I could not look at Mr. Rhys; I did not care to look at Mrs. Ransom. I stared out the window, at nothing, at the sky, at the trees: their colours were so much more brilliant than any I had seen in my girlhood I could but marvel. Perhaps this magnificence of foliage was an advance reward for the bitterness of the coming winter . . . I was desperate to distract my mind.

"Mrs. Ransom, did you live here—I believe it was four years ago—when the summer was like another winter?" I asked. "We heard in Boston it caused great hardship."

"'Eighteen sixteen an' froze to death'," she nodded. "It snowed six inches in June. Fifteen inches in July. Ten inches in August. *Nothin'* had a chance to grow to where you could eat it," she said grimly. "The animals was hit 'most harder 'n the humans. They was starvin'—there warn't no hay, and no crops 'ceptin' some rye and a bit o' winter wheat. Terrible it was, just terrible." She piled more beans in her ample lap, and continued stripping the tough dry pods apart with admirable speed and dexterity. "I made up my mind then that *nothin'*—*nothin'*—was ever goin' to send me to bed empty, not ever again."

"That's the year I was born," Constance said.

"Ye be lucky to be alive," Mrs. Ransom said. "Lucky

yore pa's a rich man, and could get a wet nurse for ye. And food for her to eat. Dunno where he got that. Down country, I expect."

I wondered where Mr. Rhys had been during that dreadful time, and how he had fared, but I did not ask. How little I knew of him: of his life, his thoughts, where he learned his trade, why he chose it . . . How little we know of anyone, I mused, even if we have the dates and the places and a list of the main events of their lives . . . My husband Israel Carson: how little I know about him, though I eat his food, and share his bed, and instruct and care for his child! He was a stranger when we married, and more than a year later, he still is.

He has never spoken of his first wife. He knows that Constance and I have carried flowers to the graveyard, yet he has said nothing. Perhaps to speak of her is too painful for him; it would resurrect his grief, which may have been excessive—a flood which left behind it desolation and waste land.

October 13th

Mr. Carson has been elected representative of the town of Welkin! He will be away until the end of the session, which may last a week, it may last two. There was no need to send word, for he left instructions that if he failed of election, he would return on the twelfth. He did not appear, then or today. So we have Tamarack to ourselves, Constance and I, every afternoon after Mrs. Ransom leaves, except for the girl who sleeps in the kitchen and starts the fires, and the lad who sleeps in the loft and looks after the horses, and the drovers who watch the flocks. Mr. Rhys comes in the morning and breakfasts with the men in the kitchen; he lunches with Constance and me; in the afternoon he is off again and I do not see him until the morning. Meanwhile the house seems to have lost part of its warmth.

I had not expected I would see Mr. Rhys at only the one meal. Even then we are scarcely alone, nor would I want to be. Mrs. Ransom puts the dishes on the sideboard, and I serve, precisely as I am wont to do when my husband is home. To do otherwise would imply a criticism of Mr. Carson in Constance's eyes, and this I will never stoop to do. Whatever difficulties I have with my

life as his wife are of my own doing, my own impulsiveness and foolhardiness; whatever judgment of him she may someday reach must be of her own planting and nourishing—doubts and criticisms of her father must not be of my seeding.

But this noonday meal is strange and somewhat disquieting. I find it hard to find topics of conversation to introduce. I find it hard to sit, the child on my right hand, the limner on my left, and keep my countenance, for I know his eyes are continually on my face—justifiably so, since he is struggling to get my features into pigment—nevertheless I find I am unaccountably shy. I talk and smile at Constance, and when on occasion I must hand him a dish, and must in all politeness glance his way, so as not to pour it on him, or miss his hand, or commit any other awkwardness, there are his eyes gazing at me, and I feel once again his lips against my mouth.

And the memory is sweet . . . is sweet.

October 14th

Constance has a fever, and I am frightened. I never really thought the child would actually fall ill, though she is slight of bone and fair of complexion; still, I had thought somehow she would always skim lightly over agues and infections. She spent the morning wrapped in a quilt and lying on the sofa in the parlour, Mrs. Ransom muttering over her work and I for once agreeing with her wholeheartedly: it was *addle-headed* to have a sick child lying in a room where the window must be open, where the room is draughty even with the sash closed, when there in the kitchen is the great fireplace with flames dancing, coals glowing, the whole room snug and warm and full of the good *reviving* smell of bread baking. When Constance (her little face flushed and her forehead damp) sneezed for the tenth time, Mrs. Ransom let out a snort, bundled her up in her arms, and declared that maybe the Mister would have our hides for not doing exactly as he said, but he'd flay us alive, she was sure, if we let the child sicken and die, and she for one wasn't going to risk it. If I had the brains of a goose and the gumption of a guinea hen, I'd keep her by the kitchen fire all night as well, and not take her up to that bedchamber that puts Mrs. R. in mind of the last time she went ice fishing. And

I cannot tell her that I am afraid to be alone with the limner on the morrow . . . that it is not Mr. Carson we need fear, but myself.

I want so much . . . I want *so much* that he should kiss me again! I know how wicked this is: I know I know! But it is *wrong*, I think it is *wicked*, that anyone should only *once* in a whole lifetime be kissed, truly kissed, with so sweet a kiss, so gentle, so—I know how odd this sounds—pure.

I feel as must one who has been colour-blind, seeing all as muddled and strange, and then, just for a moment, as if through a prism sees the world clearly, its colours singing true.

Oh, love! Love . . . what shall I do? How shall I live? How shall I bear it?

October 17th

Constance is much recovered, and I am so thankful! The fever left her yesterday, and she cannot get enough to eat. She is like a little bird accidentally shut up in a shed, and then released. "It tastes so good!" she says, spooning up a piece of fried eel, over which she usually wrinkles her nose. And, "Parsnip pie!" she says, sighing with pleasure, and we all laugh.

Mr. Rhys and I, it turns out, are honourable, and to be trusted. Or perhaps (as is more likely) there is nothing for us to be trusted about. The kiss was on his part but an impulse of the moment—yes, surely that was all it was. I am to him as Constance is to me—a creature he is in process of creating: he, myself in pigment and line, I the child by book and example. As I am drawn to caress her, this human being of my own creating, am drawn to stroke her hair, to hug her, to kiss her forehead or her cheek, loving her as an extension of myself, so did Mr. Rhys find himself desirous of kissing me, quickly and lightly, putting his seal of approval on me:—*his* creation.

If I could believe one word of what I have just written, I should be much comforted!

Of course I *do* believe it, insofar as it pertains to Constance and my love for her. The rest is but the falsest, most specious reasoning. If I sat mute, and meekly received his kiss, and neither struck him nor cried out nor made any protest, it has nothing to do with Mr. Carson

and what I perceive (or imagine) in our marriage; it has only to do with me, with my weak and sinful nature.

In any case, I can truthfully state that in the days since Constance took ill, and Mr. Rhys and I have been only the two of us in the south parlour for fully two hours at a time, and it is the fourth day now, in all this time he has not touched me, nor I him.

Except with his eyes. And I with mine.

God forgive me! I with mine!

October 20th

At half after two yesterday afternoon, when I was sponging Constance by the kitchen fire, there came a clatter in the lane as of a horse approaching at the canter, and a few moments later Mr. Carson could be heard shouting for Ransom. I hastily told Mrs. Ransom to towel the child dry and bundle her up well, and I hurried to greet my husband. I found him in the south parlour, riding cape over the green striped chair, and he standing before the 'Sea-Nymph' as if he were judging a fractious colt: as if he had expected more, but meant to be reasonable, and would make do with what he was presented.

"I am relieved you are home, Mr. Carson," said I, and lifted my cheek for his salute.

"Where is the child? Have ye not taught her to greet her father after a week's absence?"

"She has been down with a fever, but is much recovered," I said. "There was no danger as long as we kept her warm, and so I did not think it necessary to send for you." It had never crossed my mind to send for him, I realized; it had not occurred to me he might be concerned for her health, as he had never shewn the least anxiety over her physical state. "Would you care to step into the kitchen? Mrs. Ransom must have her in a fresh nightdress by now—we've been b-bathing her," I said in some confusion, for I sensed a growing constraint in his manner. "Or would you like me to bring you some refreshment here?"

"I'll have a toddy," he said coldly, his eyes narrowing over his own thoughts. "Nor do I care to take it in the kitchen."

When I brought him the steaming cup, he was again in front of the portrait. Of course it was not quite finished,

but one could see what it would be. Mr. Rhys had said we needed another two days—my right hand, which rests on a balustrade, is lacking, and my left, which is holding my scarf, is ringless. I am wearing my pale green *mousseline de soie*, which Mr. Carson ordered for me last Easter; as Mr. Rhys has painted it, the silk could be seaweed blowing and clinging, except that it is most decidedly dry, and light on the wind. I swear the sea-green gown *moves* on the board . . . As does my hair—I can feel the warm breeze teasing it . . .

"You are returned sooner than—than I had feared," I said. He said nothing, but continued to gaze at the portrait. I was commencing to feel apprehensive.

"Are you angry that I did not send for you?" I said, in what my father would have called a flanking move, had we been playing chess.

"For a trifling ailment? That would have been absurd." Then: "How long has the child been ill?"

"Three or four days." I made a pretence of counting my fingers. "No, five days, including today."

"She has been in her bed all this time? Five days? And you did not think to send for the doctor?"

"Not in her bed," I said. "That room is cold and f-far from everyone. Mrs. Ransom kept her well wrapped in quilts on the settle in the kitchen."

"Mrs. Ransom took care of her by the kitchen fire? Not you?"

"She—she really is most motherly—you—you must not judge her by appearances," I stammered.

"But you and the limner, nothing daunted, continued your labours in here?"

I could not tell him it never occurred to me to suggest we stop. "Should we not?" I said. "I thought it likely Mr. Rhys is anxious to be on his way before winter—"

"It astounds me, madam, whose welfare you put foremost!"

My heart was pounding like to suffocate me. Although he had not put his suspicions into words, I was under attack, I knew, and had best rally to my own defence while yet I could. I said coldly, "The child was well cared for—I was not needed there at her bedside. What excuse could I give for not continuing with this project you had commanded—what excuse could I put forth that would not

be insulting to you? As if your wife's reputation is so fragile that to pose for her portrait in your own parlour would somehow *compromise* her—"I felt I was becoming ensnared in pronouns, but did not know how to extricate myself.

"It is not enough that you *be* virtuous, Mistress Carson—you must *appear* to be! Evil-minded folk cannot believe that where there is smoke there is nothing smouldering."

"True," I said in a low voice, "Therefore, I would advise you, Mr. Carson, not to kindle scandal where there is none, nor industriously to use the bellows!"

He bowed. "I shall consider your advice, madam."

My initial relief on my husband's return now strikes me as prophetic. It may be he will—indeed, he must!—rescue me from my own weakness, my own madness, and by his presence protect me from myself.

October 21st

Mr. Rhys arriving to commence work this morning was astounded to find my husband already returned from Montpellier.

"You, too, are to be congratulated on your industry," Mr. Carson said, returning his bow. "My wife tells me you have let nothing interfere with the progress of your work."

Mr. Rhys gave a slight smile, and waited, as did I, for some further comment: was he satisfied? dissatisfied? was the portrait more or less what he expected? much different? But Mr. Carson, saying nothing more for the moment, seated himself where he could watch the painter's every brush stroke.

"I daresay you envy Mr. Gainsborough," my husband remarked pleasantly after a bit. "I have read he did not do the hands himself, but assigned them to a pupil."

"Are they considered so difficult, Mr. Rhys?" I said, reassured that my husband chose to be conversational.

"They are so considered," he said. "Indeed I suppose they must be, for it often seems to me they look more as if they're carved out of wood than that they consist of human flesh and bone."

"Yours—that is to say, what you have painted there—do look like my wife's own hands," said Mr. Carson criti-

cally. "I could imagine lifting each and feeling the warmth in her fingertips. Have you studied anatomy?"

Mr. Rhys placed a stroke with care, and then replied: "Only unofficially." He did not elaborate, and my husband did not pursue the matter further.

"You will dine with us, of course," Mr. Carson said, as our session drew to a close.

And so we were three at table again, but now it was not Constance, Mr. Rhys, and myself, but my husband, the limner, and me. Mr. Carson addressed himself to Mr. Rhys as if I were not present.

"This new governor seems exceptionally able, although I myself had no criticism of his predecessor. As a matter of fact, I had occasion to dine with them both," he remarked carelessly, "and they asked me if politics interested me, and when I replied that it did, they asked me if my ambitions went beyond the Legislature. I confess I was flattered, a weakness I hope I managed to conceal, and I replied that I was open to the thought of standing for higher office when the time was ripe."

"I have no doubt that you will succeed," Mr. Rhys said politely. "I am honoured to have painted the portrait of a future governor."

"And his lady," said my husband with what—had it been any other man—I should have described as a smirk. "And this brings me to business, Mr. Rhys. My wife tells me you are eager to be on your way—perhaps you have other commitments already made, households where your presence is already overdue?"

Mr. Rhys had shot me a startled look, quickly veiled, but I (feeling out of countenance) flushed. "I did not tell my husband you *said* as much," I said painfully. "I s-said no doubt you were anxious about the coming winter—"

"In a nutshell, Mr. Rhys," my husband interrupted, "I am wondering if you can fit into your busy schedule one more painting here. I am not satisfied with any of those you have done of my wife—not for the purpose I have in mind, you understand. The first two satisfy my sentimental streak—they are keepsakes, as it were, of my wife at the end of her girlhood, as a bride. The one you are now finishing is much too private, in my view—her pose and her expression are not seemly for public view—

ing, being, if you will forgive me, my dear—" and he bowed to me—"an excellent representation of Aphrodite, Goddess of Love. Your eyes, Emelie, and your smile—indeed, everything about your pose—most provocative! How fortunate that an artist is not susceptible to the charms of his subject, but views them, rather, as does a physician his patients." And he bowed to Mr. Rhys, who was watching him (it seemed to me) warily. As if he had caught the first whiff of danger, as a householder becomes aware of the trace of smoke, at first so faint he is convinced it is imaginary. "No, what I would like—and I am so impressed by your skill, your ability to read into a subject what is no longer there—is to commission you to paint my wife as—" he fiddled with his glass, and appeared a trifle embarrassed—"as—er—the Governor's Lady. That is to say, in a dignified, gracious, elegant pose, one which—" he laughed shamefacedly—"should I not realize this chimerical ambition of mine, still could hang in the best parlour here in Tamarack, and the sight of it, the pose, and so on, would not ridicule me for my too-high aim, but rather would comfort me to remember how lovely *was* my lady at the height of her beauty." And he drank again, and I wondered if he were tipsy. "Well, sir, what say you?"

Mr. Rhys did not look at me. "I cannot imagine a commission more easy of accomplishment, sir," he said. "Mistress Carson, as you say, can make a most convincing Governor's Lady—indeed, I am sure she is the match for any of the fine ladies in Washington." He gave me a small inclination of the head, as though the compliment were forced from him only by the demands of courtesy. "As for my 'pressing schedule'—you flatter me, sir! I have no one expecting me. My life is a pleasant one of wandering when and where it pleases me."

"Good. That's settled, then," Mr. Carson said, and addressed himself to his meat.

Were he not arranging for the limner to stay longer, who would otherwise be leaving in a day or two at the most, I would have thought some of his words inspired by suspicion or jealousy. "*What is no longer there*—" Had he not asked for a portrait of me on our wedding day, in bridal finery and bridal face? And the qualities he sought

in it were *innocence* and *purity*, I recalled. Did he think me lacking in them now?

I can only pray he is not so perceptive. For indeed I am no longer innocent, indeed I am impure—but not *in deed*! Only in my thoughts! And they do travel with such speed and are so hard to direct, it does seem to me most unjust that the sinner-in-thought is *equally* guilty to the sinner-in-deed. If this be true, I should think one would be tempted to have the pleasure of the sin if one is to have the pain of the punishment in any case.

October 23rd

I am to wear my green velvet. It is an elegant dress, says Mr. Carson, and it is immaterial that I have posed in it once before. This time I am to stand in front of the north Palladian window, where the light will be correct, said Mr. Carson, clear and cool and not passionate, an adjective I found surprising, never having thought the south light *amorous*. I am to assume the posture and mien of a Lady, and Mr. Rhys is to include the lovely tracery of the window behind me, and indicate, "but not in tedious detail, merely a suggestion or two," said Mr. Carson, the lawn and trees and sky beyond. My hair is to be in plaits wound over my ears, and the ringlets disciplined, not frivolous or seductive in any way—which will indeed be a change from the Aphrodite! And because I am posing practically in *public*, says my husband—there in the hallway upstairs where everyone is passing continually—he need not spend his morning hours in tedious conversation with us, but can get about his neglected affairs. And Mrs. Ransom had best finish her canning and preserving. Constance can act the *duenna* and sew and read and (laughter, brief and mirthless) guarantee our correct behavior.

Mr. Rhys is apparently deaf. I am apparently blank of mind. I look at Mr. Carson as if I do not speak the tongue he uses, and I too say nothing.

What *can* I say, that would not cause him to send the limner packing? *Another week*, I think—we have at least *another week*! Oh precious hours, oh precious minutes! Each to be cherished and stored away against the time when he is gone, and I shall never see him again, and have nothing except the remembrance of thus standing

before him, looking at him, and he looking at me, and I unable to speak, nor do I even know if he wishes he could.

October 28th

Mr. Carson leaves me almost no chance to snatch my Journal and retreat to my citadel, there to hoard away, like a squirrel against the bitter weather, the precious morsels of time I share with my love.

For he *is* my love: I have recognized him, and he me.

I donned the green velvet, and I braided my hair into plaits like pale coral snakes, and I stood there before the extravagant window. And Mr. Rhys asked me to turn this way, turn that; lift my head . . . no, not so high . . . And finally, either losing patience or because . . . because he wished it . . . he came across to where I stood, and speaking perfectly naturally in his usual voice, he said, "Mistress Carson, if you would please not turn away from the light. You must let the light shine on your face, it is essential—" And he touched me on the shoulders to turn me, and my eyes met his, and I knew him then . . . My love.

Yes! I thought. Turn my face to the light . . . I must, I must! I cannot live otherwise!

As he paints, I drink him in. I know his face now, every detail: I am storing it all away. The line of his cheek. The nose, which I think sometime must have been broken, though perhaps not. (It is a *pleasant* nose.) His eyebrows, which are careless-looking, like afterthoughts. His hair, which is much redder than mine, in some lights quite unnaturally red, in others more sandy. He is of a good height, almost as tall as Mr. Carson, but not as heavy. He has a quick, *live* way of walking—you can see he has walked many and many a mile, easily, where he wanted to, at his own pace. It gives a man's walk beauty, to be free that way, going where he will, his life his own.

What makes him different from all other men are his eyes. His eyes and his hands.

His hands are large, and the bones prominent, the skin stretched tight so that the sinews show. And clean: surprisingly clean for the hands of a man who never claimed to be a gentleman. His nails, too, are clean, and if he pares them with his knife I have never seen him do it. (To see

a man unsheath his knife and proceed to groom his nails always sets me to shuddering.)

I cannot say how his eyes do appear to me, for they change with the light, and who is speaking to him, and at whom he is looking. When Mr. Carson addresses him, his eyes are pale, like lake water beneath an overcast sky. When he speaks to Constance, sitting with her eternal needlework, they are dark, like the water near the tamaracks where the minnows hover . . . dark, dark *safe* blue. When he looks at me, when he speaks to me, they are now one way, now another. When he said, "Let the light shine on your face—" his eyes were so blue I thought I could see through to Heaven.

And always—even to my husband, strolling by with some careless suggestion that only delays the work, even to Mrs. Ransom, bustling up the stairs with an armload of laundry and another carping "Still daubin' away, Mr. Rhys? Time you be spendin', seems like you could've painted the barn!"—always his eyes are kind. Perhaps it takes a kind man to be a painter of faces. He would have to like the human race, at least those specimens of it waiting his brush.

October 29th

We are three days from finishing entirely, Mr. Rhys says. It has been snowing all day, and there is a sullen steadiness to it, a quietness, that bodes an early winter, as if this snow is not a taste, it is the main course, served early. And I, who have been dreading when my love would leave, now wish him safe away.

There in the upper hallway by the great window we are on stage: I can only look at him, and he at me. When no one is near, or only Constance, he smiles at me, and I, feeling as if I am warming my hands at the hearth, smile back. He has never said anything, not a word, nothing, about *us*, since that one time when he wished he could paint me with laughter on my lips. Well, he has done so, of course. My eyes and my lips are smiling in the Aphrodite; and in this one, though I am dignified, as befits the Governor's Lady, yet I do look happy, I think. Which shows how accurately my love paints what he sees: standing there before him, my eyes on him, I *am* happy. It is foolish, there is no reason for it, yet I am.

But I say nothing. Nor does he. Even a whisper—especially a whisper, which, treacherously, can carry—would be madness.

November 1st

The snow has been falling steadily for three days—this makes the fourth—and it is deep, nearly three feet on the level, and a wind is springing up to pile it into drifts. Mr. Carson has gone out with Levi Ransom, and all the men are helping to drive the sheep into the barns. It is weeks earlier than is usual, advantage always being taken of the bare days during November when the flocks can get at the frozen grass. Mrs. R declares she never saw the snow so deep so early—first snows are usually just ‘you wait and see’, a sprinkling of an inch or two, and then gone when it warms up again. (I know only the one winter here, but I remember we had first a freeze, then a thaw, in layers, and always mud with the thaw.) Mrs. R says once the snows come for good and the road is rolled, everything is easier. “But sometimes it takes weeks before the roller gets through, though with Mr. Carson being an important man, now, in the Legislature, and hobnobbin’ with the Governor, maybe the roller’ll come our way before Christmas.” Since it is now but the first of November, this does not sound to me like much of a hope, and in the meantime . . . in the meantime what is my love to do?

Mr. Rhys has finished the Governor’s Lady. I asked him if he was satisfied with it, and he said, “I find it . . . memorable.” To this I could think of no light reply, so fell silent. My heart was so full—I had so much I wanted to say. That I would remember . . . that this was goodbye . . . that I couldn’t bear it.

But I must. Like all else, I *must* bear it!

November 2nd

Yesterday Mr. Carson blew in from his labours on a gust of wind as the early dark was settling in. His face was grey with cold, his eyebrows and the scarf he’d wound across his mouth rimed with frost. The sheep were safe, he said, and Mr. Ransom would see his wife safe home, where she was to stay until the weather let up; it was foolish for anybody to risk the walk up from the

bridge. The three herdsmen could forage for themselves in the kitchen, as could the lads from the barns.

Mr. Rhys, I saw, had his pack ready; it was there in the hall by my husband's office door. "I think, sir, I too had best be off," he said.

"Ye must be daft," said Mr. Carson. "How far d'ye thing ye'd get this night? We'd find you—what's left of you—in a ditch when the snow melts in the Spring. Wait for a break in the weather, Mr. Rhys, when ye can be sure of getting as far as Welkin at least. No—no more protests, if you please. I had not realized Mistress Carson and I had been so lacking in hospitality ye'd prefer to rush off into a blizzard to be rid of us!"

Mr. Rhys protested that his stay had been very pleasant—we had both been very gracious to him, very thoughtful—it was just that he dreaded taxing our patience . . . being a burden—

"We will worry about that tomorrow," said Mr. Carson, pouring two tots of rum. "Come, let us go toast the 'Governor's Lady'."

While they went to look at the painting, Constance and I served up the pumpkin soup and boiled beef. On their return, I could see something was amiss, though Mr. Carson was affability itself. Something must be amiss, I thought, for Mr. Rhys looked at me as if he had never seen me before, we were strangers, and bound to remain so.

"It does you justice, Emelie, I am relieved to say," said Mr. Carson. "I have congratulated Mr. Rhys on his talent. I shall be the most envied of men. Such an expression of devotion! Such warmth! Curbed, of course, by propriety. I confess I was—irrationally, I admit—touched for a moment by jealousy. It occurred to me, you see—you must forgive me, my dear, but I have strong feelings where you are concerned, and am not, therefore, always impartial, or indeed just—it occurred to me that it was not I at whom you were gazing when these emotions surfaced. Mr. Rhys is quick, however. When I made reference to my momentary—ah—distress, our young friend here at once allayed my uneasiness. He had been speaking of me, said he, something to the effect that it was an honour for him to be painting my family, and you replied in quick pride, your face lighting up in the emotion he has caught

—ah, he *is* quick! To catch what must have been so fleeting a look!”

And he urged me to have more marrow dumplings.

—And I was so frightened . . . so frightened for my love.

But in the night when my husband claimed me, I persuaded myself I was foolish to be frightened. He had meant no more than he said. For a moment—for a moment only—it had occurred to him that when my face wore that rapt, that happy look—*oh, God! why did I not hide my thoughts!*—I had been gazing at another man; then he was reassured it was of himself I'd been thinking . . . He *must* believe this: how else could he take my body with such zealous and unslacking vigour? Surely if he thought me unfaithful he would find me repulsive, would he not? A loathsome object he could not bring himself to touch . . .

Today the house is buried in silence. The wind has ceased and across the north windows and those to the east the snow is layered in uneven ribbons of dirty grey. The drifts must be almost impassable for a man on foot. I am thankful indeed that Mr. Rhys is where I can see him, and can know he is safe.

Mrs. Ransom did not come; no one expected her. I did what I could with pot and kettle, skillet and spit, Mr. Rhys 'doing the honours', as Mr. Carson put it, with wood baskets and hearth. He (Mr. Carson) went out once to the barns, returning to say they were in a state of siege, but so far holding out admirably against the onslaught of winter. He seems in high spirits, for some reason. As if he is secretly elated.

November 3rd

At supper last night Mr. Carson revealed the reason for his elation. He has thought of a plan, he said, which would justify Mr. Rhys remaining a bit longer; therefore he, Mr. Rhys, need feel no embarrassment at claiming shelter from the storm, and can choose a more auspicious time for his leavetaking. He has been considering Mistress Carson's sitting room, he said, which is most unfashionably bare, his order for wallpaper panels being unreasonably delayed, or so it seems to him, though perhaps he is just an impatient, uxorious, doting benedict. Why not,

thought he, until such time as he needs those portraits for the purposes he has mentioned—and to reveal the title 'Governor's Lady' for the latest one at this time would only lay him open to ridicule; he hoped Mr. Rhys would be discreet—why not put all four in Mistress Carson's sitting room, thus relieving its decorative nakedness?

"Now as we all know," said he, "there are *six* panels in that room. Such a scheme would therefore demand that there be two more paintings. And this is my chance," said Mr. Carson, "to avail myself of your exceeding skill, for once you have left my house, who knows if Fate will ever bring you back? And at the right moment. So this is what I want," said he. "I want a painting that is, God grant it, a prophecy: as my wife may look in—shall we say—a year's time. Paint her as a Madonna, Mr. Rhys," said my husband. "Seated in that pose that is so touching, so tender: the young mother with her child on her lap, her pure womanhood undefiled yet her destiny fulfilled, all within God's law and according to God's plan. A subject truly worthy of your talents, *Mister Rhys*," said he. "As for the child's features," he went on carelessly, "I should think it best if you were somewhat . . . ambiguous. Make the babe young enough, the features won't matter. All very young babes look alike, I am told—impossible to tell the father. So give the child features vaguely like Mistress Carson's. Hair like hers, or mine, it matters not. But my wife—above all, my wife must have a virtuous look. Yes, that above all! And now I think *Mister Rhys*, I have presented you with a challenge that you may feel goes beyond your talents? You think this is perhaps a commission *no* man could fulfill?" And he waited, his black eyes like glowing coals fastened on my love, who proved (as I knew he would) a man of courage.

"There I beg to differ, sir," said he in a voice calm and steady. "Any dauber with the least skill could paint Mistress Carson as a lady of most unblemished virtue. You do flatter me when you declare me to be a man of exceptional abilities: I but paint what I see before me. I am gratified that you have such confidence in my brush, and I shall do my utmost to be worthy of your trust."

"You paint what you see before you—yes, there we are in complete agreement." Mr. Carson paused, and I saw

with alarm that his colour was high. "Precisely, Mr. Rhys. What you see before you. Yes." He stared at me as if I were an object up for auction. "The apricot gown, I think. Yes, that one. But your hair, Emelie, modestly confined. Do you think you could do that? And hold something—some linen rolled in a bundle."

He broke off abruptly, as if something rose in his throat and choked him. I wondered what would happen—what he would retort were I to cry out: "*I was only looking at him—I never did more than look at him . . .*" It seemed to me the words hung almost audible on the air: "God looks into our hearts and considers our desires." "*Then God knows,*" I would cry, "*I would wish to be a faithful wife!*" And knew, even as I thought this, that it was not true.

My love, I thought. Oh my love, my love.

"And where would you like Mistress Carson to be, sir?" Mr. Rhys was saying easily. Like a man stepping across a morass, I thought: leap lightly from hummock to hummock, don't pause, don't slip, and don't look down . . .

"Why, methinks no place so suitable as in her sitting room," Mr. Carson said. "It is logical—surely you can see that—for the next episode in this—what shall I call it? 'Progress of a Marriage'? Well, perhaps that is too grand a title," he went on agreeably, when neither of us spoke. "It is where a young mother would retire, to enjoy holding her child, receiving there her more intimate friends, and so forth. One must give these practical considerations *some* weight, Mr. Rhys," he said, as if my love had never had a practical thought in his life.

And so we began, this morning. And not by word or gesture or look—not by the slightest sign—did my love indicate to me he was as aware as I of our peril, that he knew my thoughts or shared them, that, indeed, he had any memory of a kiss upon the mouth. In only one way did his outward conduct differ from before: he did not touch me, to guide me to the pose he wanted; he did not arrange the folds of my gown, or adjust my hair. Politely, distantly, he requested me to shake out my skirt, so . . . turn somewhat to the left; no, a trifle less . . . Yes. That would do.

Constance came skipping in, but she did not stay long;

no doubt there was some constraint in the air that made her uneasy. My Rhys painted silently, his face a mask. Mr. Carson left us alone, and I was not glad of this, but thought it ominous. Perhaps his mind was made up: the evidence was in, the verdict reached. Perhaps he hoped for some convincing piece of evidence to surface, did he but look the other way . . .

But he leaves me alone in the afternoon as well. I hear him in the kitchen below, hurling wood on the hearth, then out, stomping and cursing his way through the drifts to the barns. Constance creeps in, to sit close by my skirts, her head bent over her needlework. And all the while Mr. Rhys works desperately at his painting, like a man (I think in grief, I think in loneliness, I think in longing) who knows what fee he must pay for his freedom, and is intent on having it ready. And I—I feel I must have something on which to expend my energies and my mind or I will go mad—I (rashly, perhaps, but I am confident I will hear him return in plenty of time to hide my Journal) bring out this my friend, my true and faithful friend, and turn its pages, and, putting down my worries and my fears, hope by so doing to rid myself of them, at least for a while.

And then I think: *but he could have gone*. My love could have claimed some engagement elsewhere, used any excuse, and gone. Even now he could fling down his brush, declare the whole project beyond his ability, and leave. If Mr. Carson can fight his way to the barns, Mr. Rhys could get as far as the Ransoms. There he could stay—there he would be welcome—until the weather moderates. He could have gone, and he did not. He could go now, and he does not.

I think he stays because he hopes to convince my husband his suspicions are without foundation. To leave now, with Mr. Carson's mind so monstrously inflamed against me, would be worse than unchivalrous. (Though it is not my love's fault I sat and gazed at him like a starving beggar at a feast: how was he to know a simple kiss would find such combustible tinder waiting for a spark?)

He commences to clean his brushes. I look at him: he *cannot* feel what I feel! I have invented everything—imagined everything—he cares nothing for me! Neverthe-

less, I take pleasure in watching him. For there he *is*. He is still *there*.

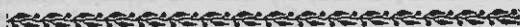
He looks up. His eyes lock with mine. They are so blue . . . so blue. "The light fades," he says, and stops, as if to sort his words. "You must see that I can do no more at this time. All that is possible I have already done. Now we must wait."

"Yes," I say. I can hardly get my breath.

I am not deceived! He loves me, he loves me! Oh, as I write these words they seem to sing . . . I am afraid, I am afraid they will sing out from the page and everyone in the house will hear!

Oh, my love! My love! Yes, we must wait!

Chapter Twenty-one



Masons and plumbers, glaziers and carpenters had gone, and only the painters were still here ten days later when the arrival of the River House furniture coincided with that of the Rowdons. Mindful of Pentacost's warning that we might have icy roads any day now (since I had 'done right' by Justin apparently I was back in Pentacost's good graces), I had gone into Welkin after such bulky supplies as flour and sugar, dried beans, potatoes, and rice, coffee and canned goods. It made sense, Justin told me, to have enough on hand to carry us through until spring; in case of heavy snowfall he could tote in whatever we need fresh.

"The Town won't plow any closer than our mailbox," he said. "Deese Ransom has an old jeep with a blade on it. He ought to be able to keep our lane clear. Otherwise I'll leave the car at Ransom's Bridge and snowshoe from there."

Heading down the east road, that steeper and shorter way to town, I pondered Justin's assumption Deese would accommodate us by plowing our lane. To be sure, he'd

agreed to cut the dead elm and butternut along the hill road—all the past week I'd heard his chain saw buzzing like a bluebottle fly—but that was for money, of which he must need considerable just to feed that clutch of children. Still, it was odd we could count on his cooperation. Hadn't Justin said he intended to catch Deese poaching? Strange word . . . musty, like something out of a long-closed trunk, a hand-me-down from the days when wild game belonged to the landowner. Had St. John cherished such strong proprietary feelings that he took personally any encroachment on Tamarack's land?

How secretive men are, I mused. They live separate lives of their own, in their own world, real or imagined, of which they do their best to keep us women ignorant. But we do the same, don't we? What had I ever told Bard of my innermost longings? Of my dreams? Perhaps men, too, are afraid of being laughed at.

What did Justin see in his daydreams? His paintings published, his vision of 'collecting' the 'destructibles' applauded and emulated by botanists worldwide? Or were his dreams more domestic, like mine? Did he imagine Tamarack was his very own: the heron settling in the reeds, the deer pacing past the burial ground—to his secret self, were these truly his, under his dominion?

Dominion . . . *dominus* . . . master of the house: already he was making the plans for Thanksgiving. It would be a shame if we lacked some essential for the feast, so while I was shopping for sacks of flour and tins of lard I should be on the lookout for pumpkins and turnips and sweet potatoes, raisins and nuts and brandy for the pudding, mincemeat for pie and cranberries for sauce. "Don't do anything yet about the turkey," he told me. "There's a shoot scheduled for the Sunday previous, Pentacost tells me, and if he doesn't get a bird, then we can sink to the ignominy of serving a store-bought. Thanksgiving is a feast that lacks flavor if there's no guest at the table, so I invited Pentacost. I thought we could count on him not finding fault with eating in the kitchen."

Perhaps Justin, too, was disinclined to dine as one half of a self-conscious twosome, I was thinking as I drove homeward. Every afternoon, once the workmen left, Justin and I were alone in the house shut off from the rest of the world by the early dark, darkness which our lamp in

the kitchen did not so much dispel as emphasize. The circle of light cast by an oil lamp is singularly unifying, I thought: those it shines upon seem linked almost as tangibly as if holding hands. Perhaps we should have installed electric light after all. Perhaps then I wouldn't feel so . . . I don't know . . . conspicuous.

The narrow dirt road was hard as iron, its ruts silvered with ice; I pushed the Audi over them recklessly. And there at last was the barn, and the double row of maples. There was the house, and a truck backed to the north door, and three men unloading a vast cabinet that must weigh God *knows* what.

I parked below the knoll and trailed the Eastlake clothes press into the north parlor, where St. John was directing the stacking of the furniture in the middle of the room. The door into the pantry hall was open, and the door beyond, into the kitchen, where I could see two elderly people standing like twin pillars of decorum and decency, of rectitude and propriety: the Rowdons, of course. I went across to welcome them.

When the truck left for Welkin and another load, St. John too came to greet them, which he did with a distant warmth very proper, I thought, to the master of the house. It was obvious he knew they'd been more than cook and gardener at the River House, that they'd pretty much run the house for Gam, Grace supervising the daily help, William serving at meals as well as coaxing the garden to bloom from frost to frost. They would have similar responsibilities here, he informed them. They would be accountable to him for their wages but to me for their instructions. ("To Mrs. St. John," he said, and I heard the phrase with a tremor of shock: it was the first time anyone had referred to me, in my presence, by my married name.) He was gratified that the sum he mentioned in his letter was acceptable; unfortunately the accommodations promised—an apartment in an outlying building—would not be ready for another ten days; meanwhile he had arranged rooms for them at Ransoms', an imposition and a trial, he knew, and he regretted the necessity.

"Mrs. St. John will show you over the house," he concluded. "Oh, one thing more—" his voice held a hint of steel—"you shall not say one word outside this house concerning anything whatsoever you may see or hear at

Tamarack. Do you accept this condition of employment?"

"Yes, sir," William said impassively. "We do."

"Yes, of course," Grace said stiffly. She turned to me. "You know I'm not one to gossip, Miss Emelie."

"'Mrs. St. John'," Justin corrected her quietly. "Or 'Madam'—I prefer it."

Well, *I* don't! I thought rebelliously. *I'm* not 'Madam' to anyone! St. John's being crafty, I thought as I led the Rowdons upstairs. Where 'Miss Emelie' might confide in Gam's Grace, 'Madam' wouldn't think of it. Though no doubt his admonition against gossip wasn't so much to nip rumors of nonexistent babies crying as to conceal the fact that I slept on the cot in the kitchen and he on a bedding roll in the lilacs room, that bedding roll which he so discreetly stored away in the cupboard every day before the workmen came. But I soon would sleep in a proper bed in my very own room, I thought exultantly, noting the progress the painters were making in the master bedrooms, those sun-drenched chambers overlooking the lake. And that, no doubt, would give the Rowdons more to keep silent about: St. John would remain where he was in the east wing, where, he said, he liked the feeling he was completely alone.

As the last of the River House furniture was being shoe-horned into the two north parlors, it struck me it was all even more massive and dark and ornately Victorian than I remembered. Had Gam really thought I'd see fit to install here in Tamarack these mahogany, black walnut, or ebonized behemoths with their exuberant curves, their clutter of columns and pediments? These pieces—that astonishing sideboard, for instance, like some kind of aborted cathedral—simply did not jibe with what she must have known was the restraint, the classic dignity of Tamarack.

For more than seventy years she herself had lived with these relics of her mother's, of her grandmother's. Perhaps she had dreaded it might be Merrill, not I, who would be sorting over the contents of these cardboard boxes tied with faded ribbon and crammed into the drawers of the serpentine-front bureau. Were there things here she did not want Merrill to see? Keepsakes she'd squirreled away, letters she'd received that would be contaminated by eyes other than mine? Perhaps, to a degree, by mine too. They

must all be disposed of somehow; it would not do to burn them unread, yet it was a kind of unwitting betrayal, I thought, when such a task fell to someone not one's own child.

I retied the string around one small box (sepia-tint post cards with one-cent stamps, a button hook, a campaign button for William Jennings Bryan) and I replaced the box and shut the drawer. All these bundles of letters could wait until later, when I was alone: I wanted to be alone with Gam. I would have the house to myself in the evenings after the Rowdons went to Ransoms', for St. John would be away a few days. Where he was going he didn't say, or why, or even precisely how long, though he'd be back for Thanksgiving, he said. I assumed it was one of those goings and comings we were both to be above 'presuming to notice', but I couldn't help wondering. Did he, perhaps, have a mistress? In Boston, or in Montreal, where he 'now and again had business'? Of course it was none of *my* business; I ought to be ashamed of myself for speculating . . . All right, I *was* ashamed . . . But did he?

The Rowdons and the River House furniture came on Monday; St. John was to leave on Wednesday. On Tuesday a bright yellow Landrover was delivered, for my use, he told me, because he couldn't very well leave me stranded without transporation, could he? It would nag at him the whole time he was gone, he said lightly; this way his conscience wouldn't trouble him.

"Just the same, I do thank you," I said, stiff as a broomstick.

"Can you put it in four-wheel drive?"

"I can learn how," I said. "I can read the manual."

"We'll go for a training run—you take the wheel."

It was really very simple, except that at first I had trouble shifting.

"For God's sake throw the clutch all the way *out*!" he said.

"It *is*!" I said.

His hand closed over mine, and he moved the stick easily into the slot. "Get the feel of where it goes. Throw the clutch out again—" His hand was warm on mine; it covered my hand completely. "Do it again," he said. I did it again. "Good, you've got it." And he took his hand

from mine, but my breathing didn't steady itself until we were back by the Bible door and I'd escaped from behind the wheel.

"Perhaps you wouldn't mind fetching the Rowdons from Ransom's Bridge?"

"Gladly," I said graciously.

We now took our meals in the south parlor nearest the kitchen, at a pedestal table, ponderously carved and varnished a purple-red. It was a bleak and drafty place in which to dine, for the fireplace did not draw well and the windows were still uncurtained. On Wednesday evening, when St. John was safely two or three hundred miles away, I sat there shivering, though well sweated, and it struck me as nonsense that I should go out into the cold to drive the Rowdons anywhere. I said as much to William.

He hesitated. "If Madam will excuse me, I don't think Mr. St. John wants you here alone with no way to leave—"

"Now, William, don't be absurd," I said. "It would be more convenient all around if you drove yourselves. Besides, this way I won't have to go after you in the morning, either." I smiled at him, wishing I had the nerve to countermand St. John's truly ludicrous order. If *Madam* would excuse me, indeed! Dear God!

So off they went in the Landrover, and safe from interruption, I began to sort out Gam's papers.

It quickly became apparent she was a 'saver'. There were account books and packets of bills marked 'paid'. There were journals from the early nineteen hundreds, the Torrid Twenties, the Terrible Thirties, and then the Second War, all chronicled by tax appraisals (invariably challenged), the purchase and sale of investments, the arrival and departure of guests at the River House, the rumored departure and return of relatives residing at Tamarack.

In recording a birth or a marriage, Gam allowed herself a generous measure of pungency. "Toinette, in spite of being fat as a toad, has managed to marry a Gordon Fenwick—" evidently the Gordon Fenwick I knew was named for his grandfather—"an eager fellow with an eye ever windward, like a weathervane. Let us hope she will be less waspish now." And then: "Toinette in labor on and off for three days and at last gave birth to a son no

more than six and a half pounds. The mountain groaned and produced a mouse. Alas, the child looks like its mother, they say." Dear God, this was no mere dislike, I thought: "Toinette must have sided with Henry when he drove Gam from Tamarack.

When it came to recording the deaths, she was conciseness itself: my grandfather in 1944, Merrill's mother Janice in '59 and her father Donnet in '67—"Donnet to be buried at Tamarack after all," Gam noted laconically—and then 'Toinette, '68, and Henry, '75. Names, names, names only, I thought: They were all my kin and I couldn't picture any of them.

Why on earth did Gam leave me all these records to look over? For with the exception of the Belter parlor set, every single piece of furniture had a drawer or a cupboard or a shelf crammed with papers. "To Emelie, the following items . . . and their contents—" Was there something here she knew only I would understand? Something only I ought to know? If that was so, I wished she had left some clue which box, which packet of letters, which journal contained it. *Or didn't she remember?* Was that why she had left me all this . . . this detritus of a long, long life? Trapped there in *Années d'Or*, unable to recall just where the something was she wanted me to see . . . Or perhaps she *did* recall, but there was no one she could send, no one she trusted. . . .

And so night after night I pulled the Boston rocker close to the stove and I turned up the lamp, and (ignoring the windows staring blackly from three sides) I plodded methodically through box after box, packet after packet. I would read it all: I would read every word.

In a way, it was a happy time for me. While he was gone, Tamarack was mine and mine only. I supervised the painters refinishing the floors in the master bedrooms; I admired the knowledgeable way William pruned the grapevine; I made long and happy lists with Grace, of items like dish towels and kettles and beaters and strainers—simple, homely, domestic items that in their sum total meant security and safety. And in the evenings I dined in state at the elaborate and hideous pedestal table, William decorously removing my plate, gravely pouring coffee, quietly closing the door to the west wing. And when I heard the Landrover drive off, I would lock up the doors

and take whatever I was to read to the kitchen and curl up in the rocker next to the stove.

How fortunate I was to have Grace and William! Especially Grace. Not only did she share my pleasure in the simplest domestic task, but she never let on she was aware of our separate sleeping arrangements, nor did she address me as 'Madam'. For some reason she spared me 'Mrs. St. John' as well, yet she was scrupulous to obey his injunction against 'Miss Emelie'. She called me nothing by way of address but simply plunged directly into whatever she had to say: "If you tell me what you'd like him to use, I'll get William at those noisy hinges." "We're running low on candles." "There's a package come for you from that place where Miss Martha died. I expect they forgot to give you all her things." And so they had: her Bible, a box of writing paper, a packet of letters, and a spiral notebook had turned up in the drawer of her bedside table.

I wrapped the Bible in newspaper to protect it against dust and I gave the writing paper to Grace; the letters and notebook I laid aside to look over later. As it happened, it wasn't until Sunday evening that I got back to them.

St. John was still away on Sunday, and after dinner I suggested to William that he and Grace take the rest of the day off. I was eager to get on with my sorting and reading; yet, as the Landrover disappeared down the lane, it struck me how isolated Tamarack was . . . had always been, but it seemed particularly so on this cold and cheerless afternoon with a steady rain falling. As I locked the door after the Rowdons, I was aware how vulnerable I felt, for here I was—I who had longed to live where doors are never locked—scrupulously turning all the keys, sliding all the bolts. Or did owning things do this to me? I had certainly learned ugly new reflexes—possessive, defensive gestures that said *keep out: I don't trust you . . . I don't trust anybody*.

I put more wood in the stove, made myself a pot of tea, and once again plunged into the journals. As the light gradually faded, I read doggedly and faithfully through the Depression years and into the forties. Again, there was a running account of Gam's correspondence. "Letter from C—replied to C." "Wrote to L—heard from

L." L was Luke, of course, the Luke who was her beloved nephew. Was C my father Charles? But where would he have been, early in the thirties, if not at home, at the River House? Or was C Catherine O'Reilly? Yes, of course! Catherine would write Gam for news of her son, and Gam, loving her brother Luke, and therefore loving his Catherine, would be glad to send it. So far no letters from Catherine O'Reilly had surfaced, but of course, with the furniture crammed together as it was, there were a number of drawers and cupboards as yet beyond my reach.

By four-thirty it was almost dark. The rain-soaked windows gaped at me like drowning faces. I wouldn't feel so threatened by the blackness beyond their blotched, distorted panes, I thought, if only I knew which tree creaked so, which branch rubbed against the house . . . No—there was none near enough: it must be the house itself I heard. Which was nonsense: *brick* houses don't sigh and mutter in a wind . . . do they?

The thought of the empty house looming on the other side of the wall was exceedingly disquieting. I picked up the lamp and stiffly, self-consciously (as if I were on stage) I crossed the passage and locked the connecting door to the south parlor, and then—still with that disturbing sense of a hostile audience watching—I made my way past the well-stocked shelves to the door to the north parlor, and locked that. Now I had only to do the one at the head of the stairs.

I stared up into blackness. If I didn't lock that door, why trouble to lock the other two? I crept up the stairs, groped for the key, turned the lock as silently as I could, and fled back down, the light from my lamp bobbing and dancing on walls and ceiling and black-paned window in the terrace door. My heart was laboring and my chest ready to burst. I had gone up and come down on one lungful of air, as if drawing a breath might have disturbed something . . . or awakened somebody. As if the use of these stairs had been forbidden, and I was being willfully disobedient.

Resolutely, I poured another cup of tea. The hot liquid helped cool my imagination, and somewhat shamefacedly I opened the next journal, which was dated January, 1957. My eyes were beginning to tire. I'd stop when I

reached me, I decided—when I came to myself, born in April, that month of uncertain sunshine and easy tears . . . I rubbed my eyes to clear them.

There I was at last: "Luke has a great-granddaughter, born before daylight. They will name the child Emelie Stark, since I have forbidden them 'Martha' for fear of passing along my own ill luck. Charles says there were difficulties and further Carsons are unlikely. Perhaps it's just as well—enough is enough of male Carsons, *obsessed* and *possessed* as most of them were."

It was an odd and somehow unsatisfactory birth announcement, as if I, the newborn, were almost superfluous. Idly, I flipped through one of the later journals. My eye was caught by my father's name, and Donnet's, in what appeared to be a draft of a letter (or a telegram) to my father:

Dear Charles, with the utmost reluctance I inflict on you the news that Donnet died last evening by his own hand.

By his own hand! That would explain that curious circumlocution Gam had used in recording Donnet's death: ". . . buried at Tamarack *after all* . . ." Surely the Carsons' burial ground was not hallowed in the sense that suicides could not be buried there? He'd been a widower . . . was he so lonely, then? But he had Merrill—in '67 ("Donnet in '67," Gam had listed tersely) Merrill had been eighteen, and lovely. Had she been so like her dead mother it broke his heart?

I was being hopelessly romantic. There were all sorts of other reasons to kill oneself besides heartbreak. After all, he wasn't twenty, like Bard . . .

I restored the journal to the dwindling pile of 'unread' and put the packet of letters and the notebook from Anées d'Or with them. I'd read the rest tomorrow; I'd take it all upstairs and read it somewhere by myself, when Grace was busy in the kitchen and the painters whistling at their work; I'd finish the journals and read the letters and go over the notebook with diligence and with love, but it would be when the house was alive and I didn't have this feeling that I, I alone, like the boy with his finger in the dike, was the sole defender against some force

that was growing too strong to be held back much longer.

Why I didn't quit then and go to bed, I don't know. I suppose I had reached that state of trancelike fatigue where one simply doesn't have the energy to make the effort. Whatever the reason, I thought I'd take just one quick look at Gam's *Années d'Or* notebook. Maybe there was something about me . . .

Indeed there was. On the very last page, my name leaped out at me:

"My dearest Emelie: By now you will know that Tamarack is yours . . . Tamarack is a house that needs to be sanctified with love . . ."

My eyes filled with tears, the script blurred, and I was back in the room in the Welkin Inn, had just buried Gam, had just heard the Will, had just walked out to the cemetery to thank her but had not found her there . . .

"Tamarack must not be anyone's fairweather house—I will not have it so demeaned . . ."

And then there was a long paragraph Xed out by two strokes of the pen. On the theory that what people don't say is often more revealing than what they do, I read on: "As for the stipulation that no one can inherit from you except your own children, I put that in because I do not want you to be the object of fortune hunters. I do not want you to be another Janice, Emelie! When she married Donnet Mansfield, she signed over to him, as a condition of their marriage, her share of Tamarack, but as you know, Henry long outlived her, so Donnet was disappointed on that score as well as others. I don't want *you* subjected to the humiliation of buying yourself a husband, and therefore I have made it impossible . . ."

I was sick with shame. If Gam *knew*—if there was any sort of slit in the curtain through which she could see what I had done: taken a husband to get Tamarack for myself . . . dangled in front of him not the lure of myself as his wife, the sharer of his bed, the mother of his children—no, nothing as honorable and decent as that! "Marry me and for five years you can play-act that Tamarack is yours—"

Why *had* St. John married me? I was an idiot if I thought it was simply to help me out. If he pitied me in that fashion, he would love me, wouldn't he? Pity is the threshold of love. God knows he felt nothing of *that* sort

toward me! Because if he did—well, I would know it. Whatever his motives were, love—what I meant by love—had nothing to do with it.

Greed, then? But he could not possibly acquire Tamarack through marriage to me, as he kept pointing out. *Unless we had a child, and then I died.* In which case Tamarack would be as good as his. . . .

But for anything like this to happen, obviously our marriage couldn't be 'in name only'. And he'd been quick to agree to that stipulation. Well, it was simple enough for an attractive man to ensure that doors were unlocked . . . that is, he would assume it was simple enough: he often looked at me as if he found my standoffishness amusing, and whenever he grew tired of it he would say, "Enough of this nonsense, Emelie—"

A chunk of wood snapped in the stove and I jumped at the sound. Shame and humiliation swept over me. Whatever prompted these fancies of mine—loneliness, I supposed, as much as anything—the truth was, St. John had not married me because of *me*, but because of Tamarack. What exactly was his ultimate goal I had no way of knowing. Whether I was an obstacle to be swept aside, or an extra trophy to be taken as a kind of unavoidable but acceptable-if-free bonus, I did not know. Come to think of it, I did not really *know* anything except that I was the object of a most poisonous envy, as witness that wretched unsigned letter. Again, whether this envy was sexual [St. John] or material [Tamarack] I did not know. Was the letter only a venting of noxious emotion—a 'leakage' to prevent build-up of pressure to the explosive point—or was someone really trying to drive me out? Trying to drive me away through fear or shame?

I stared at the glowing chinks in the stove. For me, shame would not be enough, I suspected. Shame I had faced down when I had bargained with St. John, when I agreed to marry him, a stranger, as my only chance of keeping Tamarack. For me, it would take fear, I thought. But fear of what? A candle in an empty room?

Outside, there was silence, absolute as the grave. The wind had died, the rain ceased. Now in the windows there was nothing to catch and reflect the lamplight; the panes drew my eyes by their emptiness, their blankness, their *nothing-more-ness*. Like death, I thought: I know what's

beyond the glass, but while I'm here in this room I cannot see what is there, I cannot see what I know I'll see when daylight comes. Is death, then, the coming of light, not of darkness? And some cannot wait . . . like Bard—Donnet and Bard . . .

Gam's notebook slipped to the floor. As I bent to pick it up the rocker creaked forward, and I thought it was the rocker I heard. For a fraction of an instant I thought it was only the rocker, its ancient wood protesting at the shifting of my weight. But it was nothing so tangible, so here-and-now. It was not even here—it was, as that other time, overhead, in the Hogarth room.

A child—an infant—was wailing, not lustily, as if expecting anyone to come, but hopelessly, as if it knew its cries would not be heard, or if heard, would go unheeded.

Chapter Twenty-two



My breath scarcely coming in, scarcely going out, all I could hear was the frantic beating of my heart.

I *had* heard the child. I could not comfort myself that I had not heard it, that I had imagined it, that I need not go and see what it was. I could no more not go than I could escape execution had some monstrous guard just bawled forth my name. *Emelie Carson!* must pick up the lamp and mount the stairs and unlock the door at the top, *Emelie Carson!* must make her way down the passage and open that door, *Emelie Carson! Emelie Carson! Emelie Carson!* must go on in, shining her lamp ahead of her, and around, and into every corner. To see what was not there.

For there would be nothing: there would be no child. I could see, as clearly as if I already stood in the doorway, the empty room, the silent panels, the bare windows black against the night. There would be no child abandoned in

its cradle, there would be no bundle of blankets on the floor before the hearth.

I went up because I had to; I went in because I had to. I flashed the lamp from one corner to another and the light slewed crazily across the windows, darkness chasing it, swallowing it. The Hogarth room was as empty as that first time I ever went in, that first day I set foot in Tamarack.

Someone was playing tricks on me—someone *must* be playing tricks! Could there be a recording device hidden anywhere? Up the chimney, perhaps? Behind the panels? Impossible to tell now—I'd have to wait until daylight. I swept my lamp once more around the walls. That poor harlot—she'd never had any luck. Never had any real happiness. *Never!* The word struck the room like a lash. *Never!* to see my father's face, to hear my mother's voice . . . *Never!* to talk with Gam . . . *Never!* forever and ever *never!* to hear Bard's step on the stair . . .

The silence throbbed about me, the blackness of the windows swelled and faded. *Someone lost a child in this room*, I thought lucidly, and in this room *never* is *forever*: the grief is here still. Whose child was it? Catherine O'Reilly's? Was it in here she gave birth, was it here she kissed her child and put him in Martha's arms and fled the room *as I am fleeing now* . . . ?

I slammed the door shut and turned the key in the lock. *That's right, everybody knows you can dam up a flood of tears or smother a storm of grief by locking a door.* But I turned the key in the lock nevertheless, and I reached to slide fast the bolts across the top and bottom—*bolts that of course weren't there.* I had never seen bolts there, had I? My hand groped across the top rail. There had never been—*yes, there had.* There was a roughness in the paint, a scant pattern of little craters spaced as if once there had been a bolt here at the top, and here, on the jamb, its socket. I knelt, and felt across the bottom of the door. Yes, there had been a bolt here, too. Someone, sometime, had wanted that door to stay securely shut, had wanted to lock someone or something securely in. *And I had known it.*

Up here the house was so cold I could see my breath in the lamplight. Oh, *God*—the fire must have gone out in the lilacs room! St. John had told William not to let it

get below freezing, because of his paints. There was no help for it: I'd have to go across there and light it again.

In a state of virtual self-hypnosis—see how calm I am? how conscientious?—I crossed the upper hall to the east wing, and for once this part of the house seemed to radiate sanity and safety. I made my way to the lilacs room, stirred the ashes in his stove into life, and put in more wood. Then I went down to my cot and, tense and sleepless, lay staring at the beamed ceiling, listening, waiting . . . waiting for what? The wail of a new-born infant? It would have made a good birthing room up there, I thought—near the main house so that the cries of the woman in labor would not reach the parlors.

Was that what that light had been? The candle moving: had it been someone pacing back and forth, waiting for the birth to proceed? The midwife, perhaps. Martha, comforting Catherine. Or was it Catherine herself, as her strength returned? Of course not: there had been those shoulders—it had been a man. Not a doctor, I thought: there'd been no aura of compassion, nor of healing. Had it been Ismay, telling Catherine to go?

Dear God, was I *mad*? Ismay was dead before Henry drove Gam from Tamarack, and that was three quarters of a century ago. Ismay, Henry, Luke—they were all safely buried . . . weren't they?

I listened to the sough of the wind under the eaves, and vowed I'd not spend another night in this room. The Rowdons would be glad to have me out of here. What a shame there wasn't a bed in the whole of the River House furniture! Would Justin buy me one, perhaps? No, I couldn't ask him. He'd already spent far too much, and besides, somehow he'd make it the occasion for ribald humor, I knew he would. Though it didn't seem right that I should keep his cot. Well, we'd work it out somehow . . . I'd better take the master bedroom nearest the west wing. If I chose the other, across the hall, I'd have him right on the other side of the bathroom wall, where he'd clearly hear me every time I bathed, or brushed my teeth, or anything. Though perhaps not: perhaps Tamarack's walls preserved the privacy of the living, and it was only the doings of those long gone that carried through its walls. I lay watching the darkness, and my mind raced, and I

longed for sleep. I suppose I did, at least in snatches, for eventually the windows took shape, and it was day.

At breakfast I told William I wanted to move some of the pieces upstairs and cautioned him not to do any of the lifting himself. He'd see to it right away, he said; Ransom would be bringing more firewood; no doubt he'd have someone along to give a hand.

Shortly after nine o'clock Deese Ransom's jeep came chugging up, towing a wagon stacked with two-foot logs. He had with him a burly man built like an ox and a lad of about sixteen who wore no jacket over his short-sleeved jersey. The three communicated by grunts and glances; the men could be brothers and the boy the son of either. They backed the trailer to the east door and commenced to unload the wood through that entrance and down the cellar stair opposite.

The morning was cold and the mist had burned off early. I thought it was light enough by now for me to see anything there was to be seen, and so, when Grace was safely occupied in the kitchen, I slipped up the curving stair (guiltily, like a disobedient child) and went along the connecting hall to the Hogarth room door, which was shut fast and locked, as I had left it. I turned the key and went in.

The room seemed entirely empty—empty of grief, empty of discarded candles, and empty, at least at first glance, of any device that could mimic a baby's cry. The best place to conceal anything would be the fireplace, I thought, and I began my search there. I looked for loose bricks, for repointed mortar—whatever might indicate recent tampering. I found nothing. I trailed my fingers over the Hogarth papers, but could detect no irregularity beyond a slight give to each raised panel that suggested an air space behind it. (This would only be good craftsmanship; how otherwise, in an unheated house, would the paper have escaped damage from moisture?) The painted moldings, though badly checked, had no conspicuous crack to suggest a recent attempt at removal. That left only the floorboards . . .

The conviction was growing on me that my behavior was worse than irrational. If there were "things to be heard at Tamarack," as Gam had said, what did I think—that they had been tape-recorded? All right, then: I

hadn't for a moment believed that the cries I heard were actual cries, had I? That is, if I really *had* heard them . . .

As I stole out of the Hogarth room, I felt an overwhelming sense of humiliation and defeat. It's all those mocking faces in the panels, I told myself: as if there's something I missed, and they know it. I can't help feeling I'm being watched. Not from the panels: from by the window—from *by that west window, where I'd seen the candleflame*. I whirled about and stared, my pulses leaping in panic. Well, there was nothing there now—nothing but the bare branches of the ash trees beyond those blank panes, restless branches reaching for the sky.

I pulled the door shut and locked it, and pocketed the key. I was creeping down the curving stair when Grace came into the hall.

"William wants to know which pieces they're to take upstairs."

I hurried past her into the north parlor.

Like men accustomed to wrestling with large and uncooperative animals, Deese and his helpers were eyeing that mountainous furniture with a kind of confident relish. I had been concerned about walls and bannisters and such, but I need not have troubled myself. Said William with quiet authority: "Any fool can bang and crash a piece from one room to another, but the trick is not to let anything get the least little nick. Mr. St. John is a fair man, and generous. You get this stuff upstairs unscratched and it's an extra five apiece."

The Eastlake clothes press went up, across and into the bedroom unharmed. The marble-topped bureau, which had belonged to Gam's mother, and the side table, which had been her grandmother's, followed. It's going to be a great consolation, I thought, to have a room all to myself, where I'll be as snug and as safe from disturbance as St. John in the lilacs room.

In the north parlor, the butternut fall-front desk was now accessible. As I pulled out the drawers, my heart sank. Envelope after envelope of that heavy red fiberboard, each with its store of ammunition against the IRS. Dear God, didn't Gam know you don't have to hang onto this sort of thing forever? 1916, 1917 . . . 1926, 1927. Dutifully, I untied the tape, examined the dreary records, retied the tape. So many years alone, so many years

wasted! Would the records of my life be as empty? 1940, 1941 . . . 1950, 1951, 1951—what had happened that year, that two envelopes were needed? I opened the second, and my weariness fell away, forgotten.

There was a packet of letters and a pale lavender box of a size to hold notepaper. As I untied the moss-green silk that bound the letters, I saw they all bore foreign stamps and were inscribed in a careless hand to *Miss Martha Stark Carson, Welkin, Vermont, U.S.A.* Could they be from Catherine O'Reilly? Indeed they were! The very first one I opened was signed in that same light-hearted scrawl, "Affectionately, your Kitty."

Since Gam (ever methodical) invariably put the latest letter on top, this first, dated April 1951, was quite probably the last she'd received from Catherine O'Reilly. Catherine had found herself in failing health, had written Gam to acquaint her of this melancholy fact and to assure her of

"my never-flagging love for you, dearest Martha. How enormously kind you have always been! And so it is with not too great a pang—for you know what a little magpie I am!—that I send you my few jewels. I'm afraid there aren't many left—I've become accustomed to my comforts and they don't come cheap—but I don't want my poor treasures squabbled over or stolen, and it does help, knowing *you*, Martha dear, will be wearing them! A Carson—how *odd* that name sounds, so old-fashioned! Well, the jewels are old-fashioned, too, as you see. And I would be *so* pleased, if you would (a thousand years from now, for you are next to immortal!) leave them to the female descendants of my son Luke. (He told me he had only the one son, Charles, but you wrote me Charles is married—is there a child yet?) It would be a comfort to know that my jewels will keep the Carson women in whose veins flows *my* blood from ever *ever* having to sell their children as I sold my son, to keep him from starving, or their body—and I did that, too! Though Hugo married me—dear *God!* but Ismay Carson taught me how to drive a bargain!—and I wish I had had children for him, but there never was another, just my dearest Luke's. Now if Charles has no daughters—well, I know

you are clever, Martha—you can fix it so that *never* will any female whose blood is tainted by Henry or 'Toinette so much as slip one of my rings on her finger! So do make sure of this, or I shall haunt them very bloodily! (Wouldn't it be marvellous if we *could* haunt those we detest? Though I think it tidier all around the way it is, don't you? I'm not so sure I want to see *our* beloved Luke again—I'm hideously old and he would be so young and smooth and beautiful. Besides, how would I explain all those others? So complicated . . ."

Dear God but Catherine O'Reilly was a charmer! And who—or what—was Hugo? The paper was imprinted with a crest; if her Hugo had a title, no doubt it made the most skilled bargaining necessary, though perhaps not: Gam had said Catherine O'Reilly was pretty, and Gam was given to understatement. Beauty plus an air of tragedy overlaid with gaiety and wit could be irresistible. I hoped Catherine's Hugo *did* have a title; it would amuse her to hear herself addressed as Lady Whoever, she who had been driven from Ismay Carson's house as too-low-born to be acknowledged!

I took the letters and the box to my room, where I found Grace polishing away the marks left by Deese Ransom and company.

"You need a chair up here. I'll bring that rocker from the kitchen. You'll be wanting a fire, too."

"Thank you, Grace. After lunch will be time enough." It was like a story, I thought: a box of jewels hidden away . . . letters from a banished bride. How clever of Gam to put them amongst all those income tax records, where a thief would never think to look! And then I had the cover off.

Wrapped in a fine linen handkerchief was a string of pearls—long, the way they wore them in the early 1900's. I held it up and it fell well below my waist—but the pearls were not as large as the obviously fake ones nowadays, but still fake, of course. That is, they *must* be fake, I thought doubtfully, though they had a sheen like luminous silk, like palest ivory, like a summer moon on a misty night . . .

I wrapped them carefully in the handkerchief and com-

menced to sort over the rest of Catherine O'Reilly's 'poor treasures'. There were some delicate earrings for pierced ears: single pearls, gold tassels, tiny glittering stars. There were two or three brooches, a man's gold stickpin, and a number of decorative hat pins of conservative length. And rings! Of these there were at least two dozen. Catherine O'Reilly, daughter of a man who had labored as hard as any man can, must have taken pride in not using her hands at all, except to display this carved amethyst, this chunk of amber, this twist of seed pearls and coral. She'd been honest with Gam: the jewels weren't all that valuable (unless, as was surely improbable, the pearls were real), but they had been *hers*, and she wanted them to go only to her descendants—

I caught my breath. Dear God! Henry had left the Tamarack furniture *to the descendants of Catherine O'Reilly!* Which was me! I was all of them! And here—here was the proof!

I shut away the box and the letters in the marble-topped dresser and went down to lunch in a state of suspended elation. And then I went into Welkin and delivered the letter—the Last Will and Testament of Catherine O'Reilly—to Dixon Mansfield.

"This is splendid!" Dixon said, coming at last to her scrawled signature. "Henry's estate will be rid of the expense of storing the furniture, and I daresay you'll be glad to have the house less echoing, won't you?"

"It does look now as if we're moving out, not in," I said with a smile. "You'll warn me before it comes, won't you? That heap of Gam's furniture is almost more than the painters can cope with now."

He chuckled in approval. "Still at it, eh? You must have persuaded Justin to do a most thorough restoration!"

"My husband has been very generous," I said a trifle coldly; after all, it was Justin who was the perfectionist, who refused to be satisfied until the woodwork felt like satin. "Which reminds me—may I have those panels removed in the Hogarth room? I can't *stand* them!"

"Hogarth room?"

"That big room over the kitchen."

"My dear child, you don't need my permission—you may do as you like in decorating Tamarack, as Martha made very clear!"

"They're attached to the wall," I explained, "and what's attached usually goes with the house, you know."

"I see. Perhaps they are part of your—ah—tentative legacy. I have no objection if you prefer to store them elsewhere."

"I'll put them in the attic, where I hope they don't unnerve the ghosts," I said.

Dixon Mansfield smiled indulgently. "Henry was forever complaining that Catherine O'Reilly's baby disturbed his sleep, but as no one else ever heard the child, and as I do not believe ghosts are selective, I always heard him out with a most disappointing skepticism. Old houses tend to be noisy, I said. Of course—" he chuckled gently—"if Henry actually *did* hear anything inaudible to the rest of us, no doubt it was the last feeble cries of his almost moribund conscience." He was inserting the letter into his Xerox. "I'll just run off a copy or two of Catherine O'Reilly's letter, and you can be on your way."

Nobody ever speaks of her as Catherine Carson, I thought. Mrs. Luke Carson, Senior. And why should Henry hear her child, when it was his father, Ismay, who had driven Catherine away? And why should I—what had I done?—to anyone but Bard, that is.

I was pleased to find a fire burning brightly in my bedroom grate and the rocker set before it. I had no intention of spending the evening in the kitchen, straining to hear what wasn't there; nor did I care to be here alone with no way to leave. As William brought in the coffee after dinner, I said offhandedly, "Oh, by the way, I'll drive you to Ransoms' tonight. I—uh—I may be needing the car." I couldn't tell him I was afraid to be here by myself . . . though what difference having the car would make I didn't know. If the baby started wailing, where would I go? Trailing after William and Grace? What could I tell them—that I heard a baby crying in an empty house? I could imagine their expressions of incredulity and pity. In whom could I confide, then? Dixon Mansfield? If I were the executor of someone's estate, and that someone had put someone else on trial, and the someone else seemed to be losing her mind—well, I'd think it my duty to see she didn't inherit. No, I couldn't tell Dixon Mansfield.

I worried for nothing: Catherine and I were not disturbed.

From her letters I could piece together her story fairly well. She had used the sum given her by Ismay Carson to buy passage to London, intending to return to her father's people in Ireland, but her money had run out. She had taken a bit part on the stage, had caught the eye of a young blood down from Oxford, had "bargained well" and married him, much to the outrage of *his* family. The marriage appeared to have been a comfortable one, if not of wild passion—against that she was immune, she wrote Gam. "Thank God one's heart can break only once, for if it heals, the threads of scar tissue keep it from ever being shattered again . . ." But Hugo was killed on the Somme, the estates were entailed, and Kitty found herself obliged to look about for greener pastures, which were just across the way, as it turned out, and she married a neighbor of the family, a gentleman-farmer, who seemed well pleased to have the widow of a viscount, and whose estate, though modest, became hers when he was killed early in 1944. But only for her lifetime, Kitty wrote Gam. "It all goes to his nephew when I die, Martha dear, so don't think I am indifferent to young Charles's needs, when he embarks on the life of a scholar—he could use all we can scratch up, God knows!"

That same spring, her son Luke had come to see her on his way to cover the invasion. It must have been a strange meeting: she a woman in failing health but still beautiful; my grandfather, whom she had left in Gam's arms when he was a week old, now a distinguished journalist in his late forties. Why hadn't she sent for him after that successfully maneuvered marriage to Hugo, Viscount Whoever? Apparently her son had asked her that very question, for in August, when she wrote to console Gam on their mutual loss (Luke had been killed in that first assault on Normandy), she had added:

"It was so hard to explain my cowardice. My words sounded hollow to my own ears—imagine how they sounded to Luke!—when I said that his grandfather Ismay, a most vindictive man, would have declared I'd never married his father—that he was my bastard son, nameless and unwanted—and when Luke said no one

would believe that, there were records to prove the opposite, I said, 'Yes, but Hugo might. Hugo could accept a young widow but not—remember the old queen was still on the throne—not a "fallen woman." So I told myself you were happy with Martha at Tamarack.'

"Dear *God*, Martha—when I learned that son of a bitch Henry (you know I never swear except to mean it literally!) had turned you both out! But it was too late—it was obvious I would give Hugo no children, and if I were to confess I'd had a son, and that his unattended birth was probably the reason, Hugo would have felt cheated as well as denied, and I couldn't do it. He loved me, you see, which was a great comfort to me. I am a woman who needs someone loving me."

Dear God! but my great-grandmother and I were much alike, and in more than our choice of exclamatives. *Someone loving me*—yes, I too need that! Someone *truly* loving me, so that I can safely love him back . . .

"Sometimes I think there's something at Tamarack that poisons the Carson men" [Kitty went on]. "I know your brother was thankful to get away. Maybe it's just as well *our* Luke was driven out, too—who knows? Though for such a *vile* reason! That's what I mean, Martha—*no* one but a Carson male would think of spreading such *slime* about his own sister! It's as if Tamarack's very walls are contaminated with a miasma of envy and hate! I think it astonishing that Henry expected the rumor to be believed—my son was an O'Reilly, anyone could see that! Such *flaming* hair! Oh, I know there's red hair in the Carson line—Trueblood Carson was supposed to have it, wasn't he? But your Carson hair, yours and Luke's, is a pale orange, very quiet, whereas mine *shouts* . . ."

Why on earth would Henry drop hints that Luke was Martha's child? Besides, he need hardly bother: in a small town like Welkin, such rumors would spring up as naturally as toadstools in dank woods. There was the child: who else but Martha could be the mother? After all, who had seen Catherine come and go? No one outside the family, not even a doctor—the birth had been

'unattended', Catherine had said. Did that mean Ismay refused to have even a midwife? Catherine alone, grieving for her dead Luke, her pains increasing—surely Martha (what would she have been then—fifteen?) had been allowed to sit beside her, had held her hands, wiped away the sweat, moistened her lips—*Oh God, oh God!* But it had been a child's cries I heard, not a woman's. And bolts across the door would not have kept Martha out, only Catherine in. If they'd been for her.

Those rumors about Martha—to stop them, one need only tell the truth, and Henry had not done so, nor *Toinette*, and that was why Martha abominated them both. Although the truth was more terrible still: "This is my brother's son. We drove his widow away—we forced her to leave the child behind." A sin of hate—so much worse than a sin of love.

Then why had Henry put that stipulation in his Will that the Tamarack furniture should go only to the descendants of Catherine O'Reilly? Was it another vindictive jab at Martha—or was it something to do with the furniture itself, and he'd hit on this way to keep it out of circulation?

Catherine O'Reilly had been here hardly three months altogether, yet she'd told me more about the family than all the rest. It was strangely reassuring to think about the intricate dance of the genes from generation to generation: Trueblood Carson with pale orange hair like mine—his grandson Luke's, too—and all of us with a passionate will to survive, and to be *here*, here at Tamarack. What a pity there wasn't some official chronicle to put everything down in proper order, with the legitimate line of descent all neatly set forth, beyond argument or deceit . . .

When I awoke on Tuesday I lay for a while watching the laggard light transform the windows into cabochons of pearl. I too was changed this morning, I reflected, for the house and I were coming to terms with one another: now that I knew something of the anguish it had witnessed, of the sins committed for its sake, I no longer felt such a stranger here. As the day wore on I reveled in this feeling of having found my rightful place, and took the keenest pleasure in consulting with the painters over their difficulties and in conferring with Grace about prepara-

tions for the feast. When St. John returned, late in the afternoon, I greeted him warmly, as was only right and natural for Emelie née Carson, mistress of Tamarack. "Why, Justin—how nice to see you! I trust you had a pleasant trip?" and I extended my hand.

I was somewhat taken aback when he lifted it to his lips. "My warmest greetings, gracious wife," he said mockingly. "My trip, since you inquire, was both tedious and delightful—depending." He glanced about with that quick, evaluating stare, and at once the house was no longer mine, but his, as tangibly as if it had turned like a sunflower to face the light. "I see that gigantic cupboard is gone."

"I thought it would do for my clothes." Picturing my one black dress and good coat hanging therein, I suppressed a nervous laugh. "I've moved in upstairs—I hope you don't mind."

"Why should I mind?"

"Well, I—actually William did, but I approved—we promised Deese a bonus if he moved it up without gouging the walls."

"Quite all right," he shrugged. "Has the wine come yet?"

"I—no, it hasn't. I'm afraid I forgot about it."

"Damn. I'd hoped we could open an appropriate bottle on Thanksgiving. You might ask Mansfield about it next time you see him."

"I saw him yesterday. I found a letter from Catherine O'Reilly—it turns out she had no other children, just the one son." In spite of myself, a tinge of exultation crept into my voice.

"So? And who is Catherine O'Reilly?"

"My great-grandmother—I thought you knew!"

"Oh, yes, she with the salable son. I'd forgotten her name. Martha told me about her, of course."

Salable . . . "She had no choice!" I said.

He shrugged. "Maybe not. In any case, how does her letter concern Mansfield?"

"He's the executor of Henry's Estate as well as Gam's," I said, "and Henry left the furnishings of Tamarack to the descendants of Catherine O'Reilly—which is me! The letter proves it!"

"So congratulations are again in order? Though I'm

not so sure condolences would not be more appropriate. As usual, your timing is off, isn't it? If only you could have laid your hands on all this outrageous stuff in October, and located that letter before those damn taxes were due! You wouldn't have had to tie yourself to me at all, would you? You could have sold all this—"he waved his hand at the Belter sofa and the carved walnut sideboard—"my God, can you imagine what that would bring at Sotheby's?—and set yourself up as a rich widow, and long before your money ran out you'd have caught yourself a proper husband in the good old Carson tradition."

What on earth had happened while he was away, to make him detest me so?

He reached into his jacket pocket and withdrew a long envelope. "It occurred to me that one of my few permissible duties as your husband would be to make out my own Will. Here are two copies, one for you, one for Mansfield. The original is with my lawyers. I've no objection if you wish to familiarize yourself with its terms—in fact, I prefer you do so, you and Mansfield both." He showed his teeth in a smile, but his eyes were cold. "About the wine: I'd like to be there when Mansfield divides it—looking after your interests, you understand."

"I'll tell him I asked you to," I said steadily.

"Excellent. Oh, Emelie—" for I had turned to go—"I'm planning to set up that north room in the east wing as my workroom. The light's the same as in the kitchen, where I confess I feel underfoot nowadays." He smiled thinly. "It's always nice to keep up tradition, isn't it? Now that wing will again have its self-appointed exile."

I turned away without answering, and was halfway up the stairs when William came into the hall. "Mrs. St. John, excuse me, but Grace found this in that writing paper you gave her. She wasn't sure you'd want it—"

I leaned over the rail and took from his hand a snip of folded newspaper. Smoothing it open, I tipped it toward the light from the hall above. It was a clipping from *The Welkin Horizon*, and looked as if it had been unfolded and refolded many times. STUDENT A SUICIDE, ran the heading, and then the text: "Word has been received of the recent death of the husband of a former resident. The death was caused by a self-inflicted gunshot wound. Bardwell Milne, student at the College of Fine and Applied

Arts at—" my eyes blurred and I closed them for a moment; when I opened them again, there the clipping was, still in my hand—"Contents of a note were not made public. He leaves his parents and his wife, the former Emelie Carson—"

It seemed a good idea to sit down on the stair. "It's all a passel of lies," I whispered.

Justin was removing the paper from my fingers.

"So you weren't his wife at the time of his death—is there anything else in this that is untrue?"

"He didn't shoot himself. He—he—" There was a strange drumming in my ears. "His f-face—it was—"

"What did he use, gas?"

I ran my tongue over my lips. "One of those—those plastic sacks. It was over his head, like a—a caul." I looked up at him sharply. "Don't you laugh! I *swear* if you laugh—"

"For God's sake I am not laughing," Justin said.

"Some of them did. His friends—fellows in the dorm—" I held out my hand. "Give me that."

He put the clipping in my hand, at the same time closing his fingers over mine and pulling me to my feet. "What do you mean, 'friends'? How the hell do you define friendship?"

"You needn't shout." He wasn't—it was just that every thing sounded so loud. The painters whistling. The sander whining.

"Who sent that to the *Horizon*, do you know?"

"Bard's parents, I suppose. They blamed me."

"Damned odd that Martha would cut it out and save it."

"Somebody sent it to her. She—she quoted it. She had learnt it by heart." I began to pull myself upstairs; I felt as old as Gam. "No—now I remember," I said without turning. "Dixon Mansfield sent it to her. Gordon sent it to him."

"Emelie." He had not moved from the foot of the stairs. "Burn it," he said.

"This?" I said stupidly. I held out the clipping.

"Yes, burn it. You don't want that here in Tamarack."

"All right," I said. I went on up to my room and stood for a moment staring into the flames flickering on the hearth, and then I threw the clipping into them, and I

watched while the fire licked at the edges and then gulped it down.

And then—still obedient, still the docile wife—I opened the envelope inscribed in his flowing hand *Emelie Carson St. John*, and I drew out my copy of Justin's Will.

It was exceedingly brief. Encased in the usual legal terminology was the information that he was leaving everything he had—"all of which I die possessed—" to me, his "beloved wife *Emelie Carson St. John*," and without any limitations or conditions whatsoever.

Well, I thought, that was very generous of him—very generous indeed. It didn't matter that by the time he was done with his plans for Tamarack he would have little to leave; it was (as always) the thought that counted. A wanderer, a nomad, dreaming his own secret dreams, a gifted yet unrecognized artist spending all he had on a house that was not his—that never could be his. It was sad, somehow. Sad and strange and (I didn't know why) disquieting.

Chapter Twenty-three



Winter lay siege to the house. By morning the cold had invaded halls and bedrooms, and as I hurried down the curving stair my breath was visible on the frosty air. Though it was well after eight o'clock, the sun had just climbed above the hills to the southeast; beyond the garden door the terrace steamed in its tardy light.

Justin was already at his breakfast. He rose as I entered, and today at least the gesture was not the parody of courtesy it often seemed. "Good morning," he said, and I thought it astonishing that a countenance so forbidding when he was angry could be so attractive—handsome, even—when he smiled. "I'm beginning to think you're glad I'm back."

"Of course I am! Didn't I tell you so when you came?"

"Ah, but you didn't mean it. It was all too clear you'd been hoping your nuisance of a boarder would get lost, yet here he was again, like the proverbial bad penny."

I laughed. "I must have a transparent face. I'd been relishing the role of 'mistress of the mansion' while you were away, but the game had gone on a day or two too long."

"In what way?"

If I told him about the child . . . No, it would only remind him of my tendency to cast myself in the role of endangered heroine. "Oh, any solitary game becomes boring. Did Pentacost get his turkey? Or ought I to go into Welkin for one?"

"We could walk over and ask him, if you like."

We found Pentacost sitting on his doorstep, sucking noisily at a mug of cider. He gazed at us with such an air of innocence I wondered what he'd been up to: whittling, perhaps, for a scattering of fine shavings was commencing to curl in the sunlight. "Oh, it's you two," he said, and slurped another mouthful.

Except for the shavings, the dooryard was neat as a pin. His cabin, of peeled logs chinked with some kind of fibrous tar, was so small I thought it must have only a single room. At one end was a chimney built of squared rocks, at the other an attached shed full of neatly stacked firewood.

"You shoulda been at the shoot, Justin. Bird comes flappin' out like a damn fool—some of them wild ones is almost as simple-minded as the tame—an' this feller just hangs onto his gun, gawkin'—never even pulls the trigger—'n' he hollers, '*There's one! Hey, looky there!*'" He cackled derisively.

"I take it you got yours. Why don't you mind your manners and offer Emelie and me a sample of that cider? We'd like to drink to your aim."

As Pentacost scampered into his hut, "He's awfully far away from anybody," I said in a low voice. "What if something happened to him?"

"Nothin' gonna happen to me!" Pentacost emerged with a foaming mug. "Here you are, Emmy—drink up! I only got the one cup." He cackled with pleasure. "No, nothin' gonna happen to me, Emmy—I'm gonna live forever!"

The cider was icy cold, sweet on the tongue, strong in

the throat, and dynamite in the head. I drank half, and gasped.

Justin relieved me of the cup. "Kindly remember Emelie has to walk home," he grinned. Draining the rest, he accepted a refill. He lifted the mug in my direction. "May we all live forever. We've come after the bird. Pentacost. Mrs. Rowdon says it's a six-hour job, start to finish."

"I got it safe." Pentacost gave me a sly look. "It's in that little cave by the buryin' ground. I didn't want it hangin' around here—" he was hopping ahead of us, as if anxious now that we'd stated our business to get us on our way—" 'cause I'd've had to stick close to home to keep them hunters from swipin' it. Some folks got no sense of right 'n' wrong," he added virtuously. " 'Course I coulda locked the door, but locks is bad luck, Emmy—you know that."

He gave a careful look around before he ducked behind the lilac, to emerge with his trophy dangling from one hand. The bird was really of very impressive size, and still magnificently feathered, its body iridescent copper and its trailing wings rusty black. It looked most recently dead, and I must have gazed at it doubtfully, because Justin exchanged a grin with Pentacost and remarked, "They're all the better for hanging a few days. It's something to do with the wildness."

"Squirrels you don't need to," Pentacost assured me. "Just pop 'em in your pot. 'N' woodchucks. Bear—I dunno. It's been a powerful long time since I et any bear. Or anybody's cookin' but my own," he added. "I shorely am lookin' forrard to tomorrer."

We parted ceremoniously, and Justin and I set out for home.

The woods smelled moist, and rich with decaying leaves. At the marsh I looked for the heron, as I always did, but the reeds were empty. We started up the long slope to the house.

"I can't think why I didn't bring Pentacost some of Grace's applegate," I said companionably, trotting to keep up. "I'll never come empty-handed again. Year after year his own cooking—oh, I'm so *glad* you invited him, Justin!"

"Weren't you before?"

"Not particularly. I suppose I thought it highhanded of

you," I said, and laughed. "Sometimes I suspect I actually get *jealous* over Tamarack. Isn't that ridiculous?"

"Not in the least. It's possessive—a kind of possessiveness that strikes me as damned ugly." He lengthened his stride. "Why the *hell* do you women do it? Act as if a house is yours and yours alone, and a man is allowed in only by special dispensation, he's there only on sufferance!"

"Dear God!" I said, "whatever provoked that outburst? I'm *Emelie*—I'm not—I'm not *Merrill*!" And I held my breath.

"Don't flatter yourself you're so different," he said coldly. "You don't look much like her, true, but you think alike, and you act alike. 'My house . . . why didn't you ask *me* . . . why didn't you check with *me*?' I envy Penta-cost. He may be sick of his own cooking but by God he does as he damn pleases under his own roof!"

As I watched him stride angrily up the steps and across the terrace, I actually felt a twinge of sympathy for Merrill. Why had he resented so much the natural and necessary adjustments living with another person puts upon anyone, male or female? Didn't he know marriage couldn't be all take and no give?

By eleven on the morning of Thanksgiving Day, Grace and I had the pedestal table set with Gam's Views of London Wedgewood plates, her Gorham silver, and her ruby overlay wine glasses. I made a centerpiece of fruits in a bowl of opalescent glass, gave the table a final inspection, and went up to put the finishing touches on my own appearance.

I brushed my hair until it gleamed, and fastened it back with my tortoise shell clasp. Regretting I had no festive alternative to my faithful slacks and sweater, I decided that Catherine O'Reilly's silver brooch at my throat and her amber ring might add an acceptable note of festivity to this otherwise drab outfit, and I went downstairs feeling quite pleased with myself, to be shocked almost speechless by the sight of Justin in what surely must be a Boston-or-Montreal disguise: a suit in a fine wool whose beige and gray plaid was so muted it was almost imperceptible, an *elegant* suit—there was no other word

for it—whose understated perfection bordered on the intimidating.

The three wooden chairs—Grace must have borrowed the third from the Ransoms—had been moved from their positions by the table and set before the hearth. Pentacost was perched on the edge of his and was gazing about like a child overawed by strange surroundings but determined not to show it.

Justin handed me a glass of sherry. "I think it is Emelie's place to propose the first toast," he said smoothly. "After all, it's her first Thanksgiving in her own house, with her first guest at her table."

There is also *male* possessiveness, I thought, staring at my wine. Why doesn't he add, "but not with her first husband or I with my first wife—"? I fought back an impulse to make the suggestion aloud. One would think there was a fourth guest here, uninvited and malevolent, prompting first Justin, then me . . .

Lifting my glass, I cast my mind about for appropriate words with which to remind him I was not a duplicate, a replacement indistinguishable from the original—I was *myself*, Emelie Carson . . . "To the noble bird who graces our feast," I said, "*my* first wild turkey, symbol of all for which this day stands: a good harvest, a snug house with sound roof and full pantry and cellar stocked with firewood against the winter; and to the friend who shot the bird with rare skill—" I raised my glass to Pentacost, who modestly lowered his eyes—"and to *my*—" I hesitated; Justin was regarding me steadily, a faint smile on his lips. "To the m-master of the house," I said, commencing at last to stammer, "who—whose generosity has made it all possible, and without—without which—I mean, without whom—I would not be here, and so for which—that is, to whom—I am f-forever grateful!" And I drank. I drank the whole glass.

"Real purty!" Pentacost said, beaming. "Come on, Justin—don't stand there like a stick. Tell her it was mighty purty."

"I'm trying to think what to say," Justin said, refilling the glasses. "That's a hard act to follow."

Not an act! I was thinking, when Pentacost said, "Then I'll do it for ye." He lifted his glass. "To Miss Martha, may she sleep quiet and happy."

"Yes," I said, my throat tightening. "Oh, yes—to Aunt Martha."

Justin refilled his and Pentacost's. "To Tamarack," he said, and I thought he was going to add more, for he stood staring at the amber liquid, turning the glass in his hand. Then, abruptly, he drained it.

As we took our places at the table, it occurred to me that neither of them had proposed a toast to me . . . though why should they? No reason . . . But no reason not, either.

When the 'noble bird' was brought in, golden brown and roasted to perfection, Justin, rising to commence carving, smiled affectionately at Pentacost and said, "All right, you old rascal, confess—where did you get this?"

Pentacost gazed at him innocently. "Why, I told ye, at that shoot they had last Sunday—"

"There was no shoot last Sunday." Justin probed delicately for the joint of the leg. "There've been none this year. Banned, my lad, on account of the wild turkeys they're importing from New York State." He put a slice of white meat and a slice of dark on a plate, and William placed it in front of Pentacost, who was grinning with embarrassment.

"I *thought* they was havin' one, honest. I did. Then when I see they done me dirt like that, cancelin' it sneaky-like, I didn't want to upset Emmy here—"

"You were afraid she might think it a sin to give thanks over an illicit trophy?"

"Justin, don't roast him about it any longer!" I said, "He's in a terrible stew! Pentacost, you should have known Justin wouldn't object to a poached turkey—though we'd both hate to see you get embroiled with the law—"

"Say no more, he's been punished enough!" Justin gave me an approving grin. "Though the thought of giving thanks over a bootlegged bird does rather stick in my craw."

"Eat up, it's all legal," Pentacost said, flushing with shame. "I dickered with that pal o' Deese's—feller with the stone boat. He's got ducks 'n' geese too—noisy place."

When the pies had come and gone, and we sat over coffee and brandy, Justin pushed the nuts over within

Pentacost's reach, and asked him casually when he'd been in Tamarack before.

"Ye mean here, in the Brick House? Two, mebbe three times when I worked as a joiner—they was repairin' the big barn. Mr. Henry didn't like it, though, for us young fellers to come up to the house." He snickered. "'Course you could say he had reason, Miss Janice, she was that purty. She'd float like a swan over the lawns—they was clipped close in those days, and the flower beds all kept up. That was Miz Fenwick, how she wanted everythin' better'n perfect."

I said, "Would that be Henry's sister?"

"That's the one," Pentacost said. "Miz Toinette. Thankful Mr. Henry must of been to have her, she was that rich. Afore she come, everythin' was skimp, skimp, skimp. House like it is now, fire only in one room. But once she come, it was lights everywhere and the whole house warm. And dances, too—not them stompin' and jumpin' dances with a cat-gut fiddle, but fancy balls 'n' everybody dressed fit to kill. It was a rare, lovely sight, every window blazin' with lights, and the folks whirlin' past."

I pictured him standing at the edge of the woods, gazing up at the house. Had he been lonely? No . . . more likely curious, like one of the deer drinking at the shore of the lake, raising its head to stare at me. I imagined the people in the 'Brick House' were as strange to Pentacost as I was to the deer. "When did you build your cabin, Pentacost?" I asked.

"When Henry give me the land, three, four years after the Big War. He says, 'Here, you can have a couple of acres of Tamarack anyway, right smack in the middle of it.' And he give me a paper to prove it was mine."

"In 1949, you say?" Justin said idly, admiring the way the flames on the hearth set a ruby glowing in the depths of his brandy. "That was the year Merrill was born, wasn't it?"

"That's right. That same year Miss Janice married Mr. Donnet. Some folks was real surprised. They'd thought she were aimin' to marry Mister Dixon."

And a little silence had fallen, while Justin and I digested the implications of this remark. In his own way Pentacost was as informative as Catherine O'Reilly, I

thought, but where she was deliberately indiscreet, he was like a child, naively confiding more than he realized.

Yes, he *was* like a child, I thought now, as he went on to remark with devastating candor, "Emmy looks more like a schoolgirl than a growed-up wife, don't she, with her hair hangin' down like that. You oughta draw her picture, Justin, only not in them damned pants. She oughta be wearin' sumpthin' nice like Miss Janice in that one ye did of her."

"For God's sake, Pentacost, Merrill's mother had been dead ten years before we even met," Justin said, his face taut with suppressed irritation. "And I'm not doing portraits now—I haven't done any since—" He broke off, regarding Pentacost sharply. "So you've seen that one of Merrill?"

"Merrill, is it? She shorely favors her mother."

"Where did you see it?"

"At Mr. Dixon's. Prob'ly she didn't want it around no more, after you set her aside."

"Damn it, I did *not* set her aside!"

"Mr. Dixon says you did. I ast him how come he had that picture of Miss Janice and he said Merrill give it to him after you 'set her aside'—his very words, I marked 'em special."

"What were you doing at Mansfield's?" Justin said with a thin smile. "Making your Will?"

Pentacost chuckled. "Tryin' to. It turns out I don't own a thing. I might of knowed Henry wouldn't *give* anybody nothin'. All he did, he *lent* me the land for so long as I live."

Justin refilled the brandy glasses. "But you could sell the lumber? Or Gordon wouldn't ask, I imagine. By the way, did he ever find you? He came looking for you here, on our wedding night, a bit of timing I thought singularly tactless, even for Gordon." He swirled the brandy in his glass and did not look at me. "Though perhaps all he wanted was to sound Emelie out about Tamarack's trees."

Pentacost turned to me anxiously. "Don't you have no truck with that Gordon Fenwick, lass! He's foxy. I ast him how come he's so high an' mighty, talkin' of buyin' this, buyin' that, an' he bare-faced tells me he's got money now because Miss Martha give him that house she was

livin' in all these years. I disbelieved him, but mebbe she did—Martha was gettin' on—"

"She was sorry for his wife," Justin said dryly.

Pentacost cackled, then glanced doubtfully at me.

"I've heard Nora Fenwick is ill," I said.

"*He* makes her sick," Pentacost said. "The fat cow-bird!"

"You've mixed your metaphors," Justin said with a grin. "It's the female who gets into other birds' nests." He leaned forward to offer me the bowl of nuts. "He means Gordon Fenwick has a roving eye."

"Is that a fact?" I said, and sipped my brandy.

Justin eyed me sharply, then turned back to Pentacost. "I take it you don't intend to do business with Fenwick either?"

"What would I do with the money? I says. Know what that mush-brained magpie says then? He says I could buy me a TV! The last time I looked at one of them devil boxes, they had shot that young feller Kennedy—remember him? And there we all was, dragged to the funeral. If I sell off my walnut I kin buy me one of them boxes, Saggy Guts tells me. That's right, I says, 'n' then I kin set me down in front of it 'n' have a front-row seat in Hell!" Pentacost looked about him as if he'd like to spit. "'N' to *that* flap-lip an' not to Miss Janice's baby she left her Welkin house! It sure beats all!"

"Don't worry about Merrill, Pentacost," I said. "Gordon Fenwick sold her that River House."

"So that's how come he had money fer my trees? I mighta knowed he up 'n' sold what somebody give him. Which brings to mind—" He looked at me slyly. "I made ye a present, Emmy. You're not one to get rid of anythin' ye git, are ye? You're a hanger-onner." I flushed, and avoided Justin's eyes as Pentacost padded across to the hall. In a moment he was back, his hand behind him. "Wanta guess, Emmy?"

I shook my head. "I'm no good at guessing."

It was a carving of a heron, extraordinarily lifelike, the bird tense and wary, its angular thin legs standing on a base that was (obviously) marshy ground sloping to the water.

Stunned and moved, I held the bird in unbelieving hands.

"May I see it?" Justin took the carving and examined it with care. "It's a lovely thing, Pentacost. What's the wood, ash?"

"Ayuh," Pentacost rubbed his nose in embarrassment.

"It's truly beautiful, Pentacost," I said softly. "I shall treasure this all my life!" And I kissed him on the cheek.

He sprang to his feet. "I gotta be goin'," he said hastily. "I thank ye for a fine feast, Emmy—Justin—good day to ye both!" And before either of us could make a move, he was gone.

Justin stood looking at the heron with the withdrawn absorption of the connoisseur. "How perceptive he is," he remarked. "It's amazing." He glanced up and gave me the same look. "He's right—you do look like a school-girl." His eyes narrowed. "Why don't you put on a dress for dinner at least? And must you always wear those slacks?"

"It so happens these are the only ones I have!" I cried angrily. "Damn it, I thought they'd look better than my jeans! You know very well they stole my things—the only dress I own is that black one I wear to funerals, or—to get married in!" I was close to tears: his attack had been so unexpected I had no defenses ready.

"Then for God's sake go buy yourself some clothes—get something long to wear in the evenings."

"I can't *afford* to!" And regretted the words at once.

"Charge them to me," he said coldly.

"I'll do nothing of the kind! You aren't my husband, to pay for my clothes! Or to make comments on my appearance, may I add! What business is it of yours *what* I wear, anyway?"

"Keep your voice down—"

"Oh, you needn't worry about the Rowdons! They can't be under any illusions about the felicity of our marriage! Even if they were so n-naïve as to overlook our sleeping arrangements, this *s-superbly* festive Thanksgiving would surely enlighten them!"

What in God's name *ailed* him? Whenever we had a few moments of contentment, of quiet amity, he always spoiled everything. Rudely, brutally, almost—as if some demon got into him.

After a moment Justin said quietly, "Holidays are hell,

aren't they? Blowing on the ashes of old memories until the pain of them burns as bright as ever."

I couldn't think what to reply, so said nothing.

The next day I went into Welkin to put my copy of Justin's Will into the bank, and to deliver the second to Dixon Mansfield. I was in luck: he was at home, and saw me at once.

After we'd exchanged cordial greetings, I said, "Justin wants you to read this over, for some reason."

Dixon did so. "All very proper, I must say. I take it you are aware of the—ah—the contents?"

"Yes," I said in some embarrassment. "He asked me to—to look it over, too."

"It does raise the question of your own Will, Emelie," Dixon said gravely. "Have you given the matter any thought?"

"I?" I was astonished. "Why should I? Tamarack isn't mine!"

"True enough," he said with a faint smile, "but there's all that furniture. The River House's alone constitutes what many people would consider a fair fortune. And then, my dear, if anything should happen to Justin, you would be quite well off, as you know." He fiddled with his pen. "Suppose you and your husband were to meet the same fate as your parents, and you were to survive him long enough to inherit his estate—"

"Please!" I bit my lip. "Mr. Mansfield, I don't mean to be a coward, but I don't want to think about it! Draw up a Will that is a—a mirror copy of his. All I die possessed of to go to him, et cetera, and if he predeceases me in a common accident, everything into a trust for charity, the—the same as he wanted." You get married, I thought, and you think it is so simple, but it isn't simple at all: the ripples spread wider and wider . . . "Oh, one other thing—Justin would like to be there when you select which half is mine, of Gam's wine, I mean." I flushed. "That is, I—uh—I asked him to be."

"I understand," Dixon said dryly. "Justin always did pride himself on his palate—that was one area, he used to say, where Merrill need give him no coaching. Ask him if Tuesday will be convenient. On Monday I'd like to bring the Tamarack furniture out of storage, weather per-

mitting. I'm anxious to have everything moved in before the road gets bad."

I rose. "You won't tell Justin what's in my Will?"

"There's no need, is there? He, at least, must be convinced of *your* devotion."

All the way home I puzzled over Dixon Mansfield's verbal *faux pas*—if that's what they were. That was a rather nasty dig, that bit about Merrill having to coach Justin in everything but the taste of wine. I'd sensed a strong undercurrent of hostility: "*He, at least, must be convinced of your devotion . . .*" The whole town must be buzzing, I thought, and burned with humiliation. Married three weeks and away he goes for a—a sabbatical!

I pulled up before the mailbox. There were three items only: the *Horizon*, three days late, thanks to the holiday; a notice from Railway Express that six boxes had arrived from Ohio; and a letter—*oh, God!* More of that damnable block lettering!

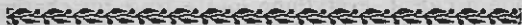
I ripped open the envelope. Again, the message was unsigned:

TAKE A GOOD LOOK AT THOSE PORTRAITS IN THAT ROOM UPSTAIRS, AND ASK YOURSELF WHICH ONE IS YOU.

Happy Luniversary, I thought, sickened.

We'd been married one month to the day.

Chapter Twenty-four



Who could have written it? Obviously, someone who knew about the panels, and who knew that it was only because I'd married Justin that I had any chance at all to keep Tamarack. (And *had* I 'sold myself' to have Tamarack? Gam would think so. Yes, I was sure she would. She knew a woman didn't have to go to bed with a man to be bought.)

All right: Gordon Fenwick. Did he know about the Hogarth panels? He must—he was supposed to check on

the house, wasn't he? But so did Merrill know about them. And Dixon Mansfield. God help me, so did the Rowdons. And they'd all heard Gam's Will . . .

I cut the motor of the Landrover and sat there watching a pair of grosbeaks feeding on a frozen apple. It was unlikely the writer knew anything about our living arrangements, because if they did (I was using the indefinite 'they' of causality and blame) they wouldn't go after the 'whore' angle, would they? If they knew I wasn't actually sleeping with Justin, I mean. So forget the Rowdons. Besides, I simply couldn't picture Grace or William penning that poison. It boggled the mind.

Pentacost. Had he ever seen the panels? Probably at some time he had had to do repairs up there. And he obviously took it for granted I was living with Justin—his barely-this-side-of-vulgar cracks made that plain. But was he literate enough to write those letters? He wasn't stupid, that was obvious, but intelligence and literacy didn't necessarily go together. No, I didn't think he had the necessary "book larnin'."

Justin. He knew about the panels. He knew better than anyone how mercenary I'd been, how much I'd taken him for, in order to meet the taxes, pay the workmen, buy materials for repairs—he might very well consider me no better than that harlot . . . worse, actually, because she at least presumably gave honest value. Damn it, no—what he'd wanted for his money he'd received: I hadn't cheated him out of the right to live here at Tamarack!

Anyway, what were those cursed letters supposed to accomplish? Send me blushing and cringing away . . . skulking away in shame? What a—an old-fashioned ideal! Laughably out of date. *Shame*—nowadays, for any sort of sexual misbehavior? Dear God, what an anachronism! Yet strangely enough, that's just what this last letter *was* supposed to do, I thought—it was intended to rid Tamarack of me, and for the absurdly old-fashioned reason that my conduct laid me open to opprobrium and ruin.

Now which of my possible correspondents would 'buy' such an idea? Scratch Pentacost, that rascal. Merrill, too—somehow she seemed too amoral herself, I didn't know why. They both in different ways and for different reasons were inclined to bypass the rules, I suspected, a tendency that might make them more sensitive to the trait—quicker

to spot my errant ways, I mean—but less likely to condemn me for them.

Gordon, then? No—not Gordon—look at the language: “Cohabitation without . . . Tamarack deserves better . . . Ask yourself which one . . .” Gordon not only didn’t talk that way, he couldn’t think that way. The letters didn’t sound like his mind.

They sounded like Dixon Mansfield, however. Dixon or Justin. Both were aware my marriage had made my tenure here at Tamarack more secure. Both had reason to call my marriage ‘convenient’. *But which one wanted me out of Tamarack?* Justin had tried to prove Dixon never wanted me in, but I’d not found his arguments convincing. And he himself had clearly showed me I wasn’t wanted, from the moment I stood on the stair and he’d said, “The heir, come to inspect,” in that tone of exceeding dislike.

I thrust the letter into my handbag and tried to think what to do. I longed to burn it as I’d burned the clipping about Bard’s suicide, but knew I could not: it was evidence. I’d put it safely out of reach, that’s what I’d do. I’d put it in that safety deposit box Justin himself with such foresight had said he didn’t want access to. But tomorrow was Saturday and the banks would be closed; I’d have to carry it about with me until Monday at least . . . a bomb I couldn’t defuse.

I went into White River the following day to collect my parents’ effects. Shortly after eleven I was back in Welkin, and thought I’d browse a bit in that dress shop. I turned onto the lane that runs past the Greenstone Gallery, and there was a station wagon in front, and Vale Whittaker easing out a painting. I rolled down a window and said warmly, “Mrs. Whittaker! How nice to see you! Did you have a good vacation?”

“Lovely, thanks! Have you a moment? I want to show you something—I’m so thrilled!” She led the way into the Gallery. “Oh, and do call me Vale, won’t you?” She flipped her hand at the disorder of paintings propped against the walls. “Would you believe we open at four? We were just about sorted out when *that* came in, and of course we’ve had to rearrange everything, because my God! it’s a Parsloe Rhys! *What* a focal point for the whole show!”

Facing the door was a painting in a style more primitive

than its contemporaries Stuart or Sully, yet with a curious sophistication. It was a portrait of a man in his late forties—a strong, stern, judgmental face with thin lips and heavy-lidded eyes.

"We're doing two hundred years of Welkin painters," Vale said, "which is stretching it, of course—the town wasn't settled until 1790. Like everyone else I'd heard rumors that Rhys was here, but this is the first real proof—*what a plum!*"

"I'm afraid I've never heard of Parsloe Rhys," I said.

"My dear—Emelie, isn't it?—that's not in the least surprising," Vale smiled. "He seems to have had a short life, even for those days. So far as anyone knows there are only three of his paintings in existence, other than this one, I mean, and they were all done before he was twenty-five. There's the one in the National Gallery—Judge Absalom Moores, I believe—and Mrs. Stanton Ehlers in the Fine Arts in Boston, and the Frayle children in Portsmouth. And now this! Sitter unknown—" She tipped her head and eyed it critically. "What a ruthless devil—vitriol in his veins, I should think! Though I ought to be more guarded in my remarks—no doubt he was one of Mrs. Broome's most illustrious forebears, and she has to pretend to be deaf!" Vale peered around the end of a partition and remarked with engaging frankness, "Please don't take offense—it's my incorrigible habit to say exactly what I think of any painting!"

Merrill, elegant in tailored gray slacks and a gray silk shirt, was arranging wine glasses on a table covered with a patchwork quilt. "You're lucky Emelie and I don't both resent your frankness," she said sweetly. "Once past our great-grandmothers we share the remaining trunk of the family tree." She flashed me her most ravishing smile. "I've been dying for you to see this, Emelie! Mrs. Whitaker tells me it's absolutely priceless, isn't that fantastic? I found it in the attic of the River House—I wonder if dear Martha *knew*? When do you suppose it was painted? Around 1830?"

Vale shook her head. "Earlier, judging by the cravat and waistcoat, though of course styles could be ten years late here in Welkin. But no one ever knew what became of Rhys after he left Portsmouth and headed up the Merimack about 1819. He was supposed to have reached

Concord—it's possible he did the Franklin family there—but after that, silence. There may be dozens of Parsloe Rhyses stashed away in attics all across New England—my God, what a seductive ideal!" Vale stared at the portrait as if mesmerized. "No, really—*look* at the bitterness in that face!"

"What a pity we have to label it 'Sitter Unknown,'" Merrill sighed. "You ought to know who he is, Emelie—didn't Martha leave you a family album? Or a miniature or two?"

I shook my head. "I haven't seen anything that goes back that far," I said, gazing uneasily at the heavy-lidded eyes, the sunken cheeks, the mouth clamped shut in a line like a saber slash.

"Then how did Martha know I didn't look like the first Emelie?"

"I've no idea . . . I wonder how the painting came to be in the River House?"

"Legitimately, I'm sure!" Merrill said silkily. "It certainly wasn't in that catalog of goodies Martha set aside for you!"

"I only meant it seems an odd place for it to turn up." He looks like he might be my anonymous correspondent, I thought, if only he weren't a hundred years dead. I turned to Vale. "Are you including my husband in your 'Welkin Painters' show?"

"I'd like to, very much, but we just can't give space to contemporary work that's not for sale. Of course the historical things are on loan only, but Mrs. Broome most gallantly has allowed us to put a good steep price on the Rhys, which ought to hold it until we can get an appraiser up here from Boston; meanwhile if some madman does buy it, she'll be satisfied, and so, God knows, will I!"

"Really, Emelie, Justin is so misguided in this *obsession* of his to do his pretty pictures of flowers," Merrill said sweetly. "What a pity you don't use your influence—which must be considerable still!—to persuade him to do more *serious* work!"

"I'm surprised you don't persuade Dixon Mansfield to put up Justin's portrait of you," I said, my voice trembling with anger. 'Pretty pictures', indeed! "But Dixon wouldn't want to sell it, would he?"

"It is a shame," Merrill agreed, "because without question it's the best thing Justin has *ever* done."

"Perhaps in the spring, as you suggest, Mrs. Broome," Vale said smoothly, "but it's all terribly iffy at this point. Emelie, I do hope you and your husband can get in for the opening." Involuntarily, her eyes slid past me toward the canvases as yet unhung, and I thought it high time I made an exit.

"I'd love to, but I can't promise," I said.

"I'll be back by three-thirty in full war paint," Merrill said. To my surprise, she fell into step with me as I went down the walk. "Where are you off to?"

I said uneasily, "I thought I'd look at clothes."

"Oh, may I come? I adore shopping! Besides—" she lowered her voice—"I have to talk to you alone. I'm trying to get the Gallery to give Justin a one-man show—" My astonishment must have showed in my face, for she gave a little laugh and said, "You wrong me, Emelie! When it comes to Justin's art, I can only respect it, and try to help! Now if we can persuade Vale Whittaker not to insist that everything on exhibit be for sale—he's as stubborn as stone and won't give an inch about selling those *impractical* flower sketches of his!—and if we can keep him from knowing I had anything to do with it—well, we might just pull it off! But it's *essential* you say nothing about me, Emelie, or he'd refuse outright! Though why he should be so unforgiving, I cannot think," she sighed. "That's always the way, isn't it, when you hurt someone. *He* divorced *me*, you know—oh, didn't you know? He has the grace to be ashamed, then? But don't feel sorry for me, Emelie—it's Justin we ought to be sorry for, because there is something pitiful, don't you agree, something really tragically *small* about a man who falls out of love with his wife because she doesn't inherit the house or the land he expected her to!"

Dear God! As if any man would marry Merrill for her *money*! Of course Justin hadn't divorced her—men didn't do the divorcing, women did. Besides, Justin had said, "She got what she wanted the second time round—" Didn't that mean it was Merrill, not he, who wanted out? He was so bitter, he *must* have been the discarded. Anyway, how could a man get a divorce on the grounds his wife had not inherited a house? It was ridiculous . . .

She was flicking the dresses along the rod. "They're all like something to wear to a cocktail party when you're bored to *death* with cocktail parties," she said disdainfully.

"Hardly my life," I said with a deprecating laugh.

"Are you just looking for inspiration or for something in particular?"

Everything she wore conveyed that she was a warm, exciting woman, high-spirited as well as beautiful, an expensive playmate but worth it to the man who could afford her. The advice of a woman who could dress herself with such skill would be of considerable value, I told myself, and answered meekly, "Something with a long skirt—you know, for dinner and the evening."

"My dear, how *élégante*! So you've persuaded Justin to shed those hunting clothes of his occasionally? I congratulate you!"

"It didn't take much persuading," I said, stung by the suggestion that I, too, would try to nag him into domesticity.

She said with a throaty laugh, "No, of course not—he was always only too ready to—ah—cooperate."

I said furiously, "You know very well that's *not* what I meant!"

She laughed again. "I think it's so *sweet* how you blush! Justin must find it refreshing! Tell me—what size are you?"

I could hear stirrings in a cubbyhole out of sight, and I should, I suppose, have made some attempt to quell her with my tongue, but I couldn't think of what to say that wouldn't sound shrill or supersensitive or laughably unsophisticated.

"Twelve," I said reluctantly.

"Really? I suppose you have the height to carry it."

"I'm the peasant type," I said through gritted teeth.

At that moment Madame Proprietor emerged from wherever she had been keeping herself, and, oozing smiles, said that her winter things were practically gone, her cruisewear was going fast, and her spring things weren't in yet. "Almost *everybody* is a twelve," she added, "and they've *demolished* my stock."

They certainly had. There was something with sequins and something with fringe, and that was about it. Perhaps

a separate skirt? She had this *charming* flower print—one could wear different blouses—and it had such a light-hearted flounce all around! And she produced a garment with a design of hibiscus in various shades of pink.

"Oh, not with a blouse!" Merrill said impatiently. "You can't have *everything* loose, Emelie." She narrowed her eyes at the soft pink sweater the shopkeeper was holding—it was a silky knit with ruffles about the scoop neck and at the wrists. "I don't know—it's certainly peasanty—"

"I'd like to try it on," I said, and I slipped into the dressing room, the shopkeeper fluttering after me. It fitted well enough. At Merrill's urging, I stepped out reluctantly and took an experimental twirl or two.

"Such an unfortunate color," Merrill murmured. I didn't know if she meant the knit or my hair.

"There isn't a woman alive who can't wear pink," the shopkeeper stated with finality. "Which is lucky—men *adore* pink!"

"It has that fireside touch," Merrill said.

"I'll make you a price," the shopkeeper said to me. "Our sale starts next week, but you can have a third off now."

"I'll take it," I said.

"I think you're making a mistake," Merrill said.

"I don't," I said. "I'm sure I'll get my money's worth."

I would, too, I thought on the way home. I always did. I couldn't afford not to. Even when (as I frequently did) I chose unwisely, I wore and wore and wore the mistake until it was quite worn out . . . As most of us do, I thought. Clothes . . . jobs . . . marriages. In a way, I envied Merrill, discarding hers without regrets. Did I honestly wish I could afford to do the same? Up to a point only. *He'll* have to do the divorcing this time, I thought. If I keep it up, I'll get typecast . . .

Justin had lunched alone and gone out, so I did not see him until dinner. I had been unpacking my father's books, a melancholy task that threatened to overwhelm me with homesickness; I was not, therefore, in any mood to put on a new and festive dress. Tonight it's still 'come as you are', I thought on my way down to the dining room.

"I missed you at lunch," Justin said pleasantly, offering me a glass of sherry. "What delayed you?"

"I had to go to White River. Then I—uh—I ran into

Vale Whittaker. She was getting the Gallery ready for the opening this afternoon, and she wanted me to see something special—"It occurred to me it was going to take some skillful skipping if I was to leave out all mention of Merrill. "The show consists—I mean, it's a—a comprehensive review of Welkin painters," I went on clumsily. "Vale said she was sorry you wouldn't put any of your work up for sale, because of course that—that kept you out—" I wished he would look somewhere besides my face. "She invited us to the opening, but I told her we were too busy."

"I wasn't aware we have such a crushing schedule."

I flushed. "I'm not very good at making polite excuses. N-naturally I couldn't say I knew you wouldn't want to come!"

"I'm always interested in what the 'competition' is doing, if only to be glad I'm out of all that. I think it would be an excellent idea if you let me turn down my own invitations."

"I didn't think you would want to go if it involved taking me," I said painfully.

For a moment he regarded me in silence. Then: "I apologize for my remarks on Thanksgiving. I certainly didn't mean to suggest your appearance is such that I don't care to be seen with you. Still, I do wish you didn't look afflicted with a husband too miserly to provide you with a decent clothing allowance."

I said stiffly, "I tried to make it plain you don't have the right—that is, the *privilege*—of—of—"

"Dressing you?" he said helpfully. "What a pity I don't," he added, looking me over critically. "Somebody ought to, surely. Now why in God's name does this topic embarrass you so? Oh, I see—you think if I bought you something decent to wear, I'd expect payment in the conventional coin between husband and wife, is that it? I assure you you needn't worry—"

"I am *not* worried," I said through my teeth. "You are *not* going to buy my clothes *or* my g-grateful embraces! Whatever gave you such a—a strange idea of marriage? As if it's some sort of legalized prostitution! And if I look embarrassed, it's because I feel humiliated—any woman would—to have it made so clear and at such in-t-tolerable

length, that I look an absolute *mess*! Dear God, *will* you change the subject?"

"Gladly," he said in a deadly voice.

At that moment William came in with the soup, and we moved like strangers to the table, where, punctilious as ever, Justin seated me, took his chair opposite, and—this was new—coolly opened this week's *Horizon*, of which he offered me one section without looking at me, and then proceeded to read throughout the entire meal. I stared at my half of the paper—at a single paragraph—and wondered what it was I said that had infuriated him so.

William had cleared and I was about to take my coffee to my room when Justin gave a dry chuckle and said, "I see *Pangs of Passion* is playing in Welkin. I don't suppose you would care to go? It's rated R—what does that mean, Rotten?"

"Revealing," I said. I wasn't sure if he meant his comment as an invitation; I really didn't want to see the film, certainly not with him, but on the other hand I didn't want to refuse if he hadn't exactly asked me.

"Ah, yes. Raunchy." He shrugged. "Not for us. We probably know as much about the pangs of passion as we care to learn." He looked at me, his lips smiling but his eyes cold. "At any rate second-hand."

"Dear God," I breathed, "no blow is too low, is it, Mr. St. John?" I was on my feet. "Oh, don't get up!" I choked, for, belatedly, he was scraping back his chair. "It's *indecent* the way you f-fake all sorts of c-courteous gestures and at the same—at the *s-same* time—"

Who could have told him? How did he know? Oh, Bard! I told only Gam—no one else—never anyone else—

"Emelie," Justin was saying evenly, "any surface courtesy I show you is for my sake, not yours. Verbally I shall give as good as I get. If you intend to fence with me, either keep the button on your foil or expect to be nicked in return. Though what I said to make you wince so, I have no idea. I'm sorry I don't," he added, "because if I have a thrust that gets so effectively under your guard, it would be useful to know which it is."

"You know," I said in a low voice. I was sick with shame, shame for myself, who had been only a shadow wife to Bard, sick with disappointment and shame for

Justin, too, who somehow—though he denied it—had got hold of this wretched secret and was not above using it, was willing to turn it on me at the first opportunity. "But it isn't going to work!" I added defiantly. "The next time you try it, you'll find I—I'm wearing a bulletproof vest!"

"I doubt that's where you're vulnerable," he said, and laughed.

The next day, Sunday, I was coming out of church when Gordon Fenwick laid his hand on my arm and said jovially, "Well, well, Emelie, I hear you're receiving at Tamarack now! Pentacost tells me you're really up to snuff! When is it going to be our turn—Christmas?" Taken aback, I stammered something about having to see if my husband had any plans. Gordon gave my arm a sympathetic squeeze and said, "It doesn't have to be dinner."

"Isn't that nice? It doesn't have to be dinner!" I informed Justin sweetly; William was setting the table for our midday meal, and I had to be circumspect in my remarks.

"The word you're groping for is 'effrontery'," Justin said. "Let's have them and get it over with, but not to dinner, I agree. Meals should be shared only with family or friends."

We surely wouldn't be swamped with guests.

I spent the afternoon in my bedroom sorting over my parents' belongings, and by suppertime I was feeling both nostalgic and strangely vulnerable. Defiantly, I put on my new long skirt and ruffled top. He would say something that would embarrass me, I knew he would, but I consoled myself that at least the Rowdons would not be there to witness it. Grace had left everything ready in the kitchen, but we would have to heat the soup and carry things to the table ourselves, surely not a burdensome task. I was bringing the basket of bread and the pot of butter when Justin strolled in.

"Where's William?"

"I've given the Rowdons Sunday afternoons off."

"You don't think they ought to have Thursdays?"

"Of course—and they do! Well, not *last* Thursday," I added lamely, "as perhaps you—uh—you didn't notice."

I was sure he hadn't. Late Thanksgiving afternoon he

had driven off without a word to anyone, and had come in sometime before midnight. I had heard him come in: I had heard him in the kitchen, where there was coffee on the back of the stove; I had heard him in the dining room, where there was a cold supper under covers; I had heard him mount the curving stair and stop for a moment outside my door, as if listening (I'd held my breath), and then go along the hallway and down the passage to the east wing. If he had noticed that the Rowdons had taken the Landrover that night he made no mention of it. Now for the first time it occurred to me that he might have thought I was out in the Landrover—that pause outside my door might have been while he considered looking to see if I was there, and then he'd thought (on second thought) that he couldn't care less where I was.

"... unusual—did you make it?"

"Oh! No—I bought it."

"Really?" He spooned soup, swallowed. "It certainly doesn't taste canned."

"Oh!—Grace made the soup, of course. It's pumpkin."

"I know it's pumpkin," he said, and his lips twitched. His eyes moved slowly over what he could see of me.

"You don't like it," I said flatly.

"Of course I like it. You may tell Grace I thought it delicious."

I bit my lip. "I mean what I'm *wearing*. Why don't you come right out and say you don't like it?"

He lifted his shoulders apologetically. "I would on someone else. It's not your style, that's all. You are not Griselda the Goose Girl. And then the color—good God, why pink?"

"I thought every m—every woman could wear pink!"

"Exactly. It's trite, especially on you." His eyes played over my face. "With that pale hair and pale skin, black, or dark gray. Or white, of course. Blue-greens or yellow-greens, deep or pale. Leave pink to the poor desperate females with muddy skin, and those bouncy dresses to women like Nora Fenwick, who has no vitality of her own. Which reminds me, I hope you made it plain we expect Gordon to bring her with him Christmas afternoon. Perhaps he's not aware of it, but he leaves himself open to criticism the way he so seldom has his wife accompany him anywhere." And then, before I could say anything,

he grinned. "And on the heels of that remark I announce that I'm off to Montreal tomorrow—alone. But if you'll let me have your measurements, I'll see what I can find."

To Montreal . . . for how long?

"You're being very kind, and I appreciate it," I said, paying careful attention to how I was buttering a piece of bread, "but I *really* don't think this is the right time—I mean, before I've sold any furniture—"

"Emelie," Justin said coldly, "hasn't it occurred to you that if someone as unworldly as Pentacost notices the paucity of your wardrobe, everyone in Welkin must be remarking it? We had better look to our charade of being a devoted couple. It's not important which of us pays for some presentable clothes for you, but one of us must. I suggest I pay for my selections and you pay for yours—that's fair enough."

"What a pity you can't put off your trip for a day or two," I said icily. "The Tamarack furniture comes tomorrow, and my *devoted husband* leaves me to cope alone! And then on Tuesday—didn't I tell you?—Dixon Mansfield intends to divide the wine."

"How fortunate my business isn't particularly pressing," he said suavely. "The wine on Tuesday, eh? Dear me yes, Montreal can wait. When did Mansfield confide his plans? On Friday? Strange you didn't mention it. I wonder why you forgot?"

I stared at him. He's asking . . . yes, he's fishing . . . *Did I by any chance get a letter that upset me? Another anonymous letter perhaps? What did it say this time? Oh, poor Emelie . . .*

"I suppose because the wine isn't as important to me as it is to you," I said steadily. I wouldn't let him see how the letter had shocked me, how it still sickened me . . . not so much for what it said but because he wrote it. Of course he must have—his questions, his probing glance, made it clear he knew very well why I'd forgotten to mention the wine. No, I would never let him know I knew he wrote it—I would never give him that satisfaction! *Satisfaction?* What satisfaction could there be for him to sneer at me, for if I was the harlot, which of those men was he? The dissolute whoremonger, the pimp who profited from her profession, the magistrate taking his cut . . .

Was I daft? This was Justin St. John—the Justin who

knelt before me in the graveyard and said, his voice as gentle as the coming dusk, "There's nothing left, nothing to be afraid of . . ." Who said, "Burn it, you don't want that here, in Tamarack." Who said, "One always treasures love offered freely above that for which one must beg." Why would such a man write such a letter? How *could* such a man—

" . . . if you think you could put up with me until then."

"I beg your pardon?" I stammered.

He smiled thinly. "Where were you this time, Emelie? Not, I trust, dreaming of a rival, because you were quite pale and looked, if I may say so, as if 'close behind her a frightful fiend doth tread'—"

I hid my hands in my lap to conceal their trembling. "If you said something worth repeating, kindly do so, but spare me your sarcasm! May I remind you it was *your* idea to include in our marriage contract that clause about 'in public and in private treat each other with respect and courtesy due a—a valued business partner'!"

"I said I'll not be leaving until Thursday." He spoke softly, but there was nothing gentle in his voice now. "I was not aware that my treatment of you has been flagrantly discourteous. As for respect—" he paused, as if sorting out his words—"I'm sorry if my performance has been unconvincing. I have reminded myself that the qualities you display—a certain tenaciousness, shall we say?—a knowledgeable eye for value?—are advantageous in a business partner and I would welcome them if you were male; it is only in a female I find them repellent."

My eyes stung. "You, of course, have none of the attributes of an opportunist!"

"Sarcasm doesn't become you, Emelie."

"Because I am a woman I'm not supposed to want anything, is that it? But a man can set his sights on what he wants and go after it, using any means at his disposal that he can get away with, and nobody labels him—nobody makes h-hateful remarks—" Damn it, I would *not* cry! "I could be so happy here—everything could be so wonderful—but it isn't! I'm not! It's so—so n-nasty and I f-feel so *ashamed*—"

I couldn't help it, I couldn't stop them, tears had spilled over and were running down my face, for all I knew to splash on that damn pink knit with those damn ruffles, but

I didn't care—let it be ruined, I'd never wear it again anyway!

He was coming round the table, reaching for my hands. I hid them behind me and took a step back.

"What are you talking about? What have you got to be ashamed of?"

"You know!"

His eyes searched my face. "I don't know."

"Don't lie! You know very well!" My chest hurt; I couldn't seem to get my breath. "I know what you're doing but it isn't going to work!" I sobbed. "You aren't going to sh-shame me into leaving—or into—into anything else!"

He was too quick for me. Before I reached the door he caught me by the arm and spun me around. "Listen, you little fool," he said, "there is nothing more trite or more hackneyed than an idiot heroine who doesn't say what's on her so-called mind. What the hell are you talking about? When have I tried to 'shame' you away from here?" He had me by both shoulders and gave me an impatient shake. "What *is* all this?"

What difference did it make? If he had sent them, he would know I knew he had. If he hadn't—well, now he would know I thought him capable of it.

"The *letters*," I said.

"What letters?" Then, his eyes narrowing: "You mean that Tamarack deserves better than you two' garbage? You really think *I* sent that?" I said nothing. His grip tightened. "You said 'letters'—so there's been more?"

"You know there has!"

"Since I *know* there has, why don't you hit me with what they say? Come on—out with it!"

"Take—take a good look—"

"Go on," he said. "Take a good look at what?"

I said in a voice barely audible, "'—at those portraits in that room upstairs, and—and ask yourself which one is you.'"

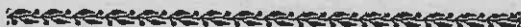
He stared at me, frowning. "And what is that supposed to mean? That you're a gullible fool? That you're an honest harlot?" He released me so suddenly I fell back against the closed door. "Surely you don't think you should be cast as the madam!" He threw back his head and laughed. "Dear God, as you would say, you must

have a most queasy conscience if that stupid message gives you a moment's concern! I am *not* flattered, Emelie, that you think me capable of such—ah—such wishful thinking. I do *not* think of you as a whore, actual or potential. I have repeatedly protested that all I want from you—the only return I ask on my considerable investment—is that you accept my presence here as gracefully as you can. So drop this tiresome *monomelodrama*, Emelie, or I shall be forced to conclude you refuse to believe me because you wish it weren't so!”

I whirled around and fumbled for the knob; he made no attempt to stop me. In the hallway I picked up my skirt and fled up the curving stair. The fire on my hearth was almost out; by its feeble glow I undressed and crawled onto my cot, where I lay staring at the flickering light on the ceiling, at the gray rectangles of the windows patterned with stars. I could not sleep. After a long time I heard him coming up the stair, whistling lightly between his teeth. As he passed my door I wondered if he had not bothered with a candle, either, for I thought I heard him stumble. It occurred to me then that he might have been drinking, he might have finished the sherry, and the wine, and gone on to brandy; and I got up and made my way soundlessly to the door and not quite soundlessly turned the key.

From somewhere down the hall I heard him laugh, then, but softly, as if he'd had an answer to a question and the answer was the one he expected.

Chapter Twenty-five



Dixon Mansfield himself accompanied the first load of Tamarack furniture. He dismounted with some difficulty from the high seat of the truck to hand me a folder marked *Henry Carson* in flowery wedding-invitation script.

"I thought, my dear, you'd want to look over this catalog—you may find it helpful in deciding what goes where. I'm afraid I must ask you to initial each item as it is brought in." He nodded a greeting to St. John, who was lounging in the doorway. "Emelie says you are to represent her at the dividing of the wine. I trust two o'clock tomorrow will be convenient?"

"Certainly. I'm always at her service." Justin strolled down the steps and coolly removed the folder from my hands. "Allow me, my dear." He ran his eyes down the first page, turned it overleaf, skimmed the next. "Excellent, excellent," he murmured. "Renaissance Revival rosewood armchair upholstered in purple damask. Fancy chair in hickory and maple, rush seat. Set of six mahogany side chairs, after Sheraton, question mark. Painted pine settee." He whistled appreciatively. "All very—ah—splendidly sedentary!" He handed me back the folder. "May I offer you some refreshment, Dixon? Coffee, perhaps? Or a glass of wine?"

"Thank you, I'd enjoy a cup of coffee." Dixon smiled benignly at me. "What a pleasure to feel welcome at Tamarack again!"

I offered Dixon one of the wooden chairs next to the fire, and Justin stepped across the passage to speak to Grace. Then, while the two men talked—Justin, I saw with relief, had decided to make himself agreeable—I looked over the catalog.

I was both delighted and appalled by its length—and astounded at its all-inclusiveness. *Cleaning rags, various*, I read in disbelief. "'Cleaning rags!'" I said. "'Silver polish!' 'Ant traps'—*ant traps!*'"

"Henry," Dixon said in some distaste, "wrote his Will in such a way we were forced to store every single item to be found in the entire house, with the exception of whatever was in the kitchen for the caretaker's use. It was absurdly costly, of course."

"I didn't know there'd been a caretaker here," I said.

"Actually, my dear, there wasn't. We couldn't find anyone who would stay more than a week. Too isolated, they all complained. I didn't think a caretaker was really necessary, since the house was empty and hard to reach. Gordon, of course, would drive up now and then to make sure no one had broken in."

"And had anyone?" I thought of that single footprint in the dust on the curving stair, that first time I ever looked past the threshold of Tamarack. Probably Gordon's, I thought; anyway, ghosts didn't leave footprints . . . The thought slipped so easily and naturally into my mind it caught me off guard; for a moment I couldn't catch my breath.

"Never," Dixon smiled. "Tamarack fortunately is a house singularly untouched by today's lawlessness." He put down his cup. "We must start back. They estimate there'll be another five loads at least."

When the truck had jounced off down the lane, Justin and I, exchanging not a word, commenced to survey the scattering of furniture on the lawn. As I walked about checking off the Patent Rocker (1849) and the Cast-iron Mangle (1880), the Jardinière (1860) and the Wrought-iron and Copper Extending Floor Lamp (no date given), the silence between us was growing deafening.

"Have you any suggestions where you'd like any of these to go?" I asked with distant courtesy; after all, he had to live with them, too.

"Into the attic, off to the auction room, or onto the woodpile, most of it," he replied indifferently. He was strolling about for all the world as if he were at a viewing preceding a country auction; his attitude was a nice mixture of normal curiosity, gentle amusement, professional interest, and apparent disdain.

"It's not quite what we expected, is it?" I said.

"I didn't expect anything," he said pointedly. "You're the one whose hopes now lie crushed and bleeding." He gazed disbelievably at the jardinière. "Possibly I am overly squeamish, but I find that an unsuitable theme for a garden ornament. Let me see the catalog." He thumbed through it. "'Jardinière, 1860, depicting Gaius Mucius Scaevola burning off his right hand before Lars Porsena.'" He raised his eyebrows. "Your ancestors' tastes were—ah—eclectic, wouldn't you say?"

"Maybe the next load won't be quite so awful," I said. I was determined not to show how disappointed I was, but truth to tell, I thought none of it worthy of Tamarack.

By noon two more loads had come, and as it turned out, everything was less offensive, and some of it quite lovely. As I directed the placing of the major pieces—an

1878 mahogany copy of a Chippendale desk in the north parlor nearest the east wing, a rosewood melodeon in the south parlor, a black walnut Renaissance Revival bedstead and bureau in the room across from mine—I toyed with the notion of doing each room in a different period, and said as much to Justin over lunch.

"Ah, yes, like Merrill." Before I could disclaim any similarity, "Be on the lookout for a cabinet in which I can store my supplies," he went on. "Anything with a cupboard and a wide drawer will do. And the cannonball bed—I'd like that, it has such a consoling ring. Lonely male, duty-driven, campaigning in the wars. The sort of bed in which, though one would miss it, naturally, one wouldn't really expect to have female companionship. For you I'd suggest that canopied one in pine and sycamore—'Our heroine, her eyes wide and dark with fear, her shapely bosom heaving, stared past the fluted columns supporting the elegantly arched tester,' et cetera et cetera." He strolled to the fireplace, where he regarded me sardonically, his back to the flames. "I, too, am a firm believer in setting the stage. By all means turn Tamarack into a museum; elegant, authentic, and with neither character nor heart. Quite an appropriate background for this domestic comedy we're playing." He sipped coffee. "But what are you planning to do with all those inconvenient bits of realism? The cradle, the child's cot, the wicker high chair? Turn them into magazine racks or plant stands?"

"They can go into the attic until they're needed," I said evenly. "Sooner or later there are bound to be children here."

"Oh, I agree," he said easily. "It's a house that cries out for them, doesn't it? What a pity it's wasted on the likes of us—why, what's the matter now?"

For I was staring at him in horror. '*Cries out*'—dear God! But he *couldn't* have! He'd been away—he'd been in Boston . . . Yes, but how far was that? Three hours? Three and a half?

"You!" I choked. "Oh, I can't believe it!"

He looked faintly bored. "What perfidy do you impute to me now? Oh, I see—you think I am about to produce a child, or perhaps children, and ask you to install them in the nursery to add to the authenticity of the décor?"

Allow me to reassure you, my dear Emelie! I have no waifs waiting in the wings—"

"You know very well I meant nothing of the sort!"

"I certainly didn't mean to suggest that *you* had a homeless brood abounding—"

"Justin," I said through gritted teeth, "*stop* it, will you? I don't find it amusing; on the contrary, I find it in very bad taste—" What I really meant was 'appalling'. It *appalled* me that he should refer to those attempts to frighten me in this lighthearted, tongue-in-cheek way. It was cruel, it was a form of cruelty that was—my God, it was almost sick. I drew a deep breath. "*Well*," I said, "I'm certainly not going to sell the Noah's Ark or the rocking horse, you may be sure! Or debase the baby's cradle into a—a wood basket! Sooner or later *someone* in the family will want to use them. I might be rash enough to remarry once Tamarack is mine. And let's not forget Merrill," I went on recklessly. "Who knows—even that Goddess of Ice and Snows might some day melt—"

With a sharp gesture he hurled his cup into the fireplace, where it shattered against the brick, the liquid hissing onto the flames. In the silence I could hear the truck laboring up the slope toward the house.

"Get out," he said in a low voice, his back toward me. "Go gloat over your latest haul, Emelie Carson Milne St. John. And *bon appétit*."

As if I were some kind of scavenger.

By the time darkness fell, in one sense Tamarack was no longer empty. I had directed the placing of the furniture as best I could, reflecting that it could all be shifted around later if need be, the thing to do was to get it under cover before the clouds let go their burden of snow. Justin had gone off somewhere in the Audi, and so I had to guess which pieces might please him. Into his studio went an Eastlake golden oak sideboard (1875) which I thought ought to be splendid for painting supplies; to this I added a most ingenious work desk (High Victorian) with an adjustable slanting top and a wealth of drawers and little cupboards below. Boxes and cartons crowded the main house halls upstairs and down; the only part of the house in which nothing was to be stored, even temporarily, was the Hogarth room, for the painters would be starting in there on Wednesday. A miscellany of objects

—wrought-iron furniture in rococo swirls and twining vines, a silver ball on a pedestal, a simpering marble Venus—had been carried to the cellar, and William had directed the stashing of boxes in the attic. He and Grace obviously were aware that something serious had occurred between Justin and me, for both spoke to me as if I were in the depths of a grave illness.

"You'd better drink this cup of tea," Grace said at my bedroom door; I was huddled in the rocker by the fire. "Will you be wanting dinner at six, or shall I put it off a bit?"

I glanced at my watch. Quarter to. "Serve at six as usual. I have no idea when Mr. St. John will be back."

The hell with hiding anything. 'Not in front of the servants—' what rot! As if they don't know!

I went to bed early and slept the sleep of exhaustion, and did not wake until there was a knocking at my door.

"It's Grace. Mr. St. John says to tell you it's nearly nine o'clock and the painters are sitting on their hands."

In less than five minutes I was dressed and presentable. I hurried to the Hogarth room, where I found the painters contemplating a line of boards daubed with tryouts of colors. Choosing a pale warm ivory for the hall, a rather striking salmon for the lavatory, and a high-gloss shade of sand for the storage closet, I said I wasn't sure any of the greens was right for the large room, I'd be back when the light was stronger and decide then.

I found Justin lingering over his coffee. As I slipped into the chair opposite him he inquired gravely if Grace gave me his message.

"Yes. I've seen the painters. I'm sorry I overslept."

"My dear Emelie, your beauty sleep is more important to me than the convenience of any hireling." For the life of me I could not tell if he were poking fun or not. "I'm not leaving until Thursday and I'll be gone no more than ten days or so; meanwhile you can place the furniture to suit yourself." His smile was friendly; one would think yesterday had never happened. "About the contents of those barrels and boxes—I daresay the glassware and linen will want washing; certainly the bedding will. You might as well wait until the Rowdons locate somebody to replace Tessie Ragdoll. Most of the upholstered pieces

will have to be recovered. I can't say I think much of the care they had in storage."

"I imagine Henry never gave them much care, either."

"In any case, this is no time to shop for fabrics; it's too close to Christmas. We can go down to Boston in January—would you like that?"

"Of course I—of *course* I would like that!"

"I had a pleasant afternoon yesterday," he went on easily. "I stopped in at the Gallery—you're right, it's an excellent show and I'm sorry nothing of mine could be included. Vale naturally assumed you had told me all about that portrait by a fellow with an odd name of whom I'd never heard. Some obscure stirrings of pride kept me from confessing you'd not mentioned him, or it—"

"Oh, yes, I did!" I said. "I told you on Saturday at dinner, I remember I did—I said I'd run into Mrs. Whitaker, I mean Vale—and—oh!" I did remember now. "I'm sorry, Justin—you're right, I didn't tell you! I *started* to—"

"Don't distress yourself," he said coldly. "I covered for you very well. Very knowledgeable I sounded. 'Ah, yes, Parsloe Rhys,' I said. 'Excellent work. Who lent it?' 'Why, Mrs. Broome—didn't Emelie tell you she ran into her here? She found it in the attic of that house her aunt left her—what a find!' said Vale." He paused. "Over to you, Emelie. That's your cue to assure me you started to tell me all about meeting Merrill, and going off arm in arm with her, two little maids from school tra la."

I said wretchedly, "That's why I forgot to tell you about Parsloe Rhys. I was so busy trying not to let you know I ran into Merrill, and that she—she helped me pick out that awful dress you dislike so—"

Like the sun creeping through the tamaracks, amusement warmed his eyes. "My God, Emelie, you ought to have better sense than to buy a dress Merrill urges on you! You must know she is seething with rage that you have Tamarack!"

"She told me not to buy it," I said. "She said I was making a mistake. Naturally I thought it must look good on me."

He laughed. "What a handicap, a pure and guileless heart!" He folded his napkin. "So what's the plan for this morning?"

"I want the Hogarth room ready for the painters," I said cautiously; it seemed to me his mood was as changeable as the wind. "That means getting those panels down—Dixon said I could."

"You thought it necessary to get his permission?"

"Well, they're not mine. Nothing is, of the house, I mean. Not yet—" *Dear God! here we go again!* "Justin," I said in some desperation, "I don't *mean* to say things that offend you. I'm clumsy and tactless but I swear I don't mean to be!"

To my surprise he replied quietly, "No, you are not tactless, Emelie. We're surrounded by verbal quicksands and I have a fiendish temper. Be thankful you won't have to put up with it forever. Let me make amends—I'll take down those panels for you."

I was in the Hogarth room frowning at the paint samples when Justin came in, followed by William bringing a pair of pliers and an odd-shaped tool that he said was a beekeeper's scraper. "Out of that box in the cellar, Mrs. St. John."

"Which goes first?" Justin said, glancing around in distaste.

"The worst one," I said.

"Where she's dying?"

"Where they're all snarling over her leavings." In a way—in a horrible, horrible way—that's us around Gam, I thought.

Justin slid the flat end of the scraper under the molding and carefully worked it loose, William pulling the nails free with the pliers. When they had three strips off, they eased the panel out, and set it down, and we all stared in stunned silence at what was underneath.

On a wide board set directly into the wall was the portrait of a young woman. She wore an elaborate white dress with low-set puffed sleeves and a flounced skirt. Her pale tangerine hair, parted in the center and piled high, was encircled by a braid like a diadem; delicate ringlets escaped to brush her cheekbones and frame her face. Dress and coiffure might have been for a bride; the expression on her face was that of one gazing in an open grave: dazed, lost, consumed by dread, hopelessness and grief drowning her eyes.

Justin was whistling soundlessly. "Who is it, Emelie?"

"How should—how should I know?" I said, and shivered.

"Vale said old tomahawk-face was an ancestor of yours—a mutual ancestor, Merrill thought—and this is by the same artist, obviously. God, what talent!"

Her eyes . . . As Pentacost would say, she had 'a front-row seat in Hell'. "It's Emelie Carson, of course," I said. "Emelie Stark Carson. The third wife. I'm sure of it!" I could not for the life of me say how I knew, but I knew. "What did he do to her, do you suppose?"

"Rhys? Probably nothing. Why blame the artist for what ails the sitter's soul?"

"You know I don't mean the artist! Her *husband*—Israel Carson—" I thought of that row in the graveyard, the stallion and his string, and shuddered with revulsion. "I can't bear to look at her! I can't help her—it's all over, whatever happened—it's been finished for a hundred and fifty years—but I still can't bear to think about it!" I wrapped my arms around me as if to warm me, and I stood by the west window, gazing down at the root cellar. That hole looks like a hungry mouth, I thought, black against the snow. . . . "Do you mind finishing without me? It seems—I don't know—as if the walls are closing in." I tried to laugh. "Poor William must think I'm daft!"

"Not a bit of it, Mrs. St. John. It's not every day we see sorrow so plain on a face that way."

"Yes—well, let me know when you're done, Justin."

It was perhaps an hour later—I was still sitting by the fire in the dining parlor—when Justin came up behind me and put his hands lightly on my shoulders. "Emelie, I think you'd better come and see what we've uncovered. You're going to have to see it sometime—better right away, and while I'm here."

I leapt up to face him. "What *did* you find?"

"Five more portraits of Emelie Carson, if that's who she is."

"All by Parsloe Rhys?"

"Oh, yes, there's no doubt about that. Come along."

There was no one in the Hogarth room but Justin, myself, and Emelie Carson. Emelie Carson in six paintings, all around the room. Emelie Carson as a young and conventional-looking bride, in an almost identical white dress, a faint, conventional smile on her lips, her eyes

bland, almost—just slightly—blank. Emelie Carson in deep green velvet, charming, poised, yet modest. Emelie Carson in lime-green silk, her pale orange hair blowing, her eyes dancing, her lips parted. Emelie Carson with her hair drawn smoothly back, her face radiant, like a saint. Emelie Carson bloodless of cheek and bloodless of lips, as if struck by frost. Emelie, wearing the bridal gown like a shroud, drowning in grief, gazing at heaven knows what . . .

"My God, what talent!" Justin said again. "He paints his heart out, doesn't he? If I could do that—lord, *lord!* I'd wind up this botanical rescue mission of mine and go back to portraits—" He was gazing at the next to last, the Emelie Terrified, and I saw with a feeling of incredulity that the emotion moving him was not pity or fear, but envy. "Damn it, I *can* get at the soul that way, it's just that I'm scared to! If I'm fond of the sitter, that is. It alienates them—they act as if you've tromped around on their insides. 'Don't paint me the way *you* see me, paint me the way I see myself!'"

I was looking slowly about, from the virginal bride, to the young woman awakened, to the . . .

"*Take a good look at the portraits . . . Which one are you?*"

At the portraits. *At the portraits.* Not the panels!

Justin hadn't written the letter! He hadn't written either one! Whoever did *must* have known these portraits were here! How long had they been covered by the Hogarth panels? Years and years, anyway. If it hadn't been for the letters, I'd have said *no* one knew about them—no one living, that is.

"*You look like her,*" Gam had said. "*God help you—God save you—*"

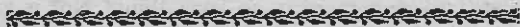
"What did he see in her face?" I said. "Parsloe Rhys—the artist—what did he see happening to her? You say you can read faces—what *happened*, to change her so?"

"The sympathetic woman's point of view," Justin said with a faint smile. "Whereas I am asking why Israel Carson commissioned portrait after portrait this way. Why not be satisfied with the first, or surely with the first two?" He was pacing slowly about the room, his hands clasped behind his back. "I think if we could answer my question, we'd have the answer to yours, too."

"Was she going mad, do you think?" I said, my throat dry. I made myself look at her face again, at the six faces—'The Regression of Emelie Stark', I thought. There was timidity at first, and a shy, untested innocence. Then what happened? Perhaps marriage itself, and to that middle-aged widower (already two wives in the grave), his nature coarse and brutal perhaps, cold and harsh surely—did the physical side of marriage prove too much for her? Girls were ignorant then as well as innocent; I had read somewhere something about a young bride thinking that children were conceived by prayer, by prayer alone. Or perhaps childbirth—the prospect of childbirth here in this isolated house, far from any of her own kin—perhaps that had terrified her. But she had survived her son's birth, at least into the next year (if one could believe the inscription on the stones). Though sometimes women went mad after childbirth—I didn't know why, I didn't know any who had, but I'd read they did. Perhaps Emelie Stark was one such . . . On the other hand, there could be some medical reason for incipient madness, something that had nothing to do with marriage, or with the character of the husband—something hereditary.

Or had she heard what I had heard? An infant wailing in an empty room . . . Had the bolts been there across the door? Penning her in, alone in an empty room where a child cried? And had she known (as I did not) whose child it was, and why no one could comfort it?

Chapter Twenty-six



November 5, 1820

The sky this morning was a heavy grey blanket, but no snow fell. The day crept towards noon without brightening, like a sullen child refusing to smile. Mrs. Ransom surprised us all by striding into the kitchen just as I was dishing up the stew. She declared she was about to lose

her mind, already housebound and so early in the winter; whilst she could wade forth, she would, she said. If I would oblige her by standing back, she'd serve up.

And so the four of us once again shared a table.

Mr. Carson spent some time delineating the garden he proposed for the slope down to the lake. "In the spring, the poet says, Mr. Rhys, a young man's fancy turns to thoughts of love," he said, and cracked a nut between the palms of his hands. "I myself would have said a young man's fancy turns in that direction in season and out. But in the winter, Mr. Rhys, I can state without fear of challenge that an *old* man's fancy turns to gardens—to brick paths versus gravel, to boxwood hedges versus yew, to lilies in rows like nuns at prayer." He cracked another nut. "Attend to your meal," he said in an abrupt aside, and Constance obediently scraped her spoon amongst the turnips on her plate. "You are an artist, Mr. Rhys," he went on. "Which would you recommend—a single path striping the slope horizontally, these strips to be joined by flights of steps placed at alternate ends—" he traced with his roughened finger on the cloth—"or a more symmetrical arrangement, a single flight of steps directly down the center?"

"Either would be striking, sir," Mr. Rhys replied carefully. "You had not thought to consider the look that is now all the rage, I understand, in England? It is less formal than the Italian. One attempts to create an effect more like Nature herself."

"I have spent my life in taming the wilderness, Mr. Rhys," said Mr. Carson coldly. "I have no wish to go to considerable expense to devise an imitation wilderness at my doorstep!"

No one asks me what I would like, I reflected, but were I to have a choice, I would choose it to be a birds' garden—though I suspect there is no such thing! Not a garden *for* the birds, but *of* them—birds everywhere, in clusters, in clouds, all singing . . .

"How goes the painting, Mr. Rhys? I confess I grow anxious to have the work done. I have sent to London for some wallpaper panels that I think will be appropriate—there's a Frenchman who's highly thought of, a fellow named Dufour. Risky, ordering sight unseen, but whatever choices a man makes in his life, it's a gamble, am I

not right?" He poured more cider into Mr. Rhys's tankard. "Come, drink up—it's dry work, gazing at other men's wives," and my husband gave a sound perhaps meant as a laugh. "As soon as the wallpaper comes I shall place the paintings about the house. Let us hope they do not make my wife vain." He patted his mouth with his napkin. "Fetch the pudding, Emelie. I am eager to see what progress was made this morning. And Mrs. Ransom had best be gone—snow won't hold off much longer."

After dinner we all trooped up to look at the morning's work. Mr. Carson gave the board one glance and said, "Indeed, Mr. Rhys, ye are forgetful, it seems. Where is the evidence she is a mother? Eh?"

"I cannot paint it," Mr. Rhys said. "To imagine what is not there—no, I lack the skill."

"Ye lack the skill—or the will?"

My love stared him bravely in the eye. "I am but a poor limner—I paint what I see," he said quietly. "My livelihood depends on my pleasing my patrons. You ask me to paint Mistress Carson, as a bride, as a young wife—this I have done. But to look into the future—to paint a lady's face as it may be next year—no, sir, this lies beyond my talent."

"Ye mistake my complaint," said Mr. Carson harshly. "It is that her arms are empty. Where is the babe?"

"Oh—that, sir! In due time. I still work on the face."

"'In due time'," my husband said. "That's bluntly put! I see I must be patient. Meanwhile, Mr. Rhys, let her newly acquired wisdom show. Pride, Mr. Rhys, is not out of place in a woman's face when she has surmounted the pangs of childbirth, survived its dangers, and triumphantly presents her husband with the fruit of their passion. Pride and perseverance, Mr. Rhys. Cunning tactics. Ye've painted soldiers, I take it? Draped with honours—bemedalled? I put it to you, Mr. Rhys, that the wife who presents her husband with an infant he takes for his has achieved as great a victory as any bumbling, foul-mouthed general sending his poor troops to die for his glory. So give Mistress Carson a proper look of triumph, Mr. Rhys. Consider her feelings of exultation, if within the year she brings forth a child and I do take it to be mine!" And Mr. Carson's features twisted into a ghastly imitation of a smile.

When we were alone, Mr. Rhys stared at me in shock, and I at him in anguish.

"I am afraid your husband is much tormented in spirit," he said at last, and dipped his brush in oil. "As are you, Mistress Carson, for I cannot paint you with a look of such distress—you must put your mind at ease—"

"How can I?" I said. "Oh, Mr. Rhys, I beg you—leave! Leave this house! You are truly in danger here—my husband suspects that you—that I—oh, I would not have harm come to you because of me!"

He placed colour on the brush. "You have nothing to fear," he said softly, "*from* me or *for* me. I will not harm you, and your husband shall not harm me. Any man who has so lovely a wife must be forgiven jealousy. I must be more careful not to give him anything on which it can feed."

"Why, you have done nothing!" I said. "*Nothing!*"

"Is it nothing, to have faithfully transposed your loving smile, your loving glance? Nay, this is all my fault, Mistress Carson—in my pride I did not rein in my skill, and as a consequence I have handed your husband clear and tangible evidence of the sweet openness of your regard. I did not curb my skill *or* my thoughts, Mistress Carson, and while I painted—" he placed the colour with care—"I allowed my thoughts to go where they would."

"You cannot—no one can—fully tame one's mind," I said.

"I was thinking you were my dear friend," he said, and did not move, but looked at me. "Come away with me, Mistress Carson—come away—"

As if he had not spoken, I said, "You must go from here at once! You could make your way as far as Levi Ransom's, and then when the snows let up, get on to Welkin. Truly I do not trust Mr. Carson to tame his temper!"

"And what would you say to him?" He wiped his brush. "The limner has left, I thought it best if he did not finish the last two pictures you have commanded? Can you not imagine his questions, and the answers he himself would put to them? If I were to leave now, Mistress Carson, I cannot think what your life would be!"

"It cannot be worse than it is now!" I cried. "He puts such questions to me *now*—he questions me *now!*"

At that moment Constance came in, and I could say no more. I do not know that I would have told him had I had the chance. But he asks me, during the night my husband asks me: *Has he ever said anything to you? Has he ever touched you? Has he ever held you?* And I deny it—no no no, I say—never! never! And for a little while he is content, but then he begins again.

So *please*, my darling my darling, my dearest love, go while you can!

November 10th

The 'Madonna and Child' is done. There I sit, holding in my arms a blanket-wrapped infant whose features—like mine—are expressionless. I stare out from the portrait like someone in a dream whose thoughts are best unspoken. I do not yet know what Mr. Carson has in mind for the 'last' portrait—surely there is no further rôle for me except possibly myself in old age.

Now I am wondering why I was to wear the same gown for the Madonna as for the Aphrodite. I no longer trust any coincidence, but see sinister reasons in everything.

It is still blowing, and the drifts are higher. Mrs. Ransom has not come these five days.

November 11th

Mr. Carson says I am to wear the white again—I am to dress my hair as for a ball, he says, and attempt to look festive; the white gown would do for a christening party, says he, and I must make an effort to look as if I am rejoicing. In the 'Madonna', says he, most unfortunately I do look as if I have recently been through an ordeal.

I am most reluctant to put on this gown; to do so implies I willingly assent to its symbolism, and I do not. I feel also a strange dread, as if it is no longer bridal but funereal. But Mr. Carson will have no other way but his own, and I don the gown, and I plait ribbons

November 12th

Yesterday as I wrote in my Journal we were startled by the sudden appearance of Mr. Carson, and I barely had time to thrust the volume under Constance's shawl,

heaped beside me on the settee. In strode my husband, and there sat I, mending Constance's shift, and there, a dozen chaste feet away, stood Mr. Rhys, his hands full of palette and brushes, innocently blotting in the ruffles of the 'bridal' gown. Mr. Carson looked from one to the other of us with such suspicion it would have been laughable had it not been so frightening. "And where is the child?" said he, scowling.

"She heard Mr. Ransom come in, and has run down to greet him," I said, biting off a thread. "I marvel he could make his way across the drifts."

"He has contrived some footgear modelled after the snowfeet of the savages," Mr. Carson said absently, frowning down at me. "Do ye intend the child to catch another fever? She has gone without her shawl." And he moved as if to catch it up, when—

"Mr. Carson, sir," said Mr. Rhys, "I must trouble you to explain what you would like for the background. In the 'Madonna' the green walls carry out the theme most excellently—life renewed, and so on—but for this last, I am not sure I understand—"

My husband turned to scowl at the painting, and quick as thought I picked up the shawl and contrived with the same motion to thrust my Journal under the cushions, which I straightened, as if their disarrangement displeased me.

"Scarlet," Mr. Carson said harshly. "Vivid, glowing crimson. Use the window hangings like a great curtain closing down a drama. Let the colour dominate the picture, Mr. Rhys! Let it surround her—let it swallow her—let it *drown* her!" His face suffused with colour almost of the shade he commanded for the portrait, he caught up the shawl and strode from the chamber.

Struck dumb with apprehension, Mr. Rhys and I stared at the painting that had provoked this outburst. I could hear my husband's voice raised in the kitchen below, and I said hurriedly, "Do you not see? He becomes more and more unreasonable—his temper and his suspicions grow prodigious beyond reason! I dread he will do you some violence—oh, please, *please* go!"

"And leave you caged with a madman?" he said. "You *must* come away with me—Emelie—come with me—"

I gazed at him, my heart leaping with joy. "You spoke

my name!" I was smiling as if it were Springtime and all the birds were back. "You called me Emelie!"

He looked as if he would weep. "God forgive me—God forgive us both—*that's* the look he wants for this—this 'churching of women'—he wants a radiance—a saintly radiance!"

We could hear Constance skipping lightly up the pantry stairs. He did not move from where he stood, but he kissed me with his eyes.

November 13th

If it were not for Constance, I would plot and plan how I could leave here. I would make some excuse—beg to visit my father, plead that I am his only child, it has been a long separation—something like that would I put forth, and trust to a loving and generous Heaven to allow me to go. I would go, and then I would beg my father not to send me back.

But Mr. Carson would come after me, and there would be nothing my father could do. I would have to return, and everything—for myself, for Constance—would be worse beyond measure.

But oh! if I *could* run off with my love! Take the child and run and run and run . . . But where to? There is *no*-where we could go and be safe, *no*-where we could hide, *no*-where we could *be*. No one would shelter us or hide our trail, we would be scorned by all decent people, and Mr. Carson would find us, and he would kill us both, I do not doubt. Then Constance would be alone in the world, with no one but her *unnatural* father to care for her. Oh, that is unthinkable! Love makes us cowards, love binds us in chains! She loves me as I love her, and I fear her father would turn on any creature who loved me, once I brought disgrace on him by fleeing!

For he cherishes his good name extremely, that I know. I marvel he leaves us so much alone, though he is exceedingly busy during this storm, and there is no one here to notice—even Mrs. Ransom does not brave the biting winds.

November 16th

It is plain my husband thinks that Mr. Rhys has been, or is, my lover. (How? When? My imagination fails . . .) Last night as I was preparing for bed he informed me that

his one unshakeable resolve is to avoid any taint of shame or hint of scandal, as this would end his political aspirations. "For the moment I shall say nothing, I shall do nothing," he said. "I want the painting finished and the painter gone. If this story gets out—that my *wife*—" his thoughts rose up and near choked him—"if you allow Mrs. Ransom to catch a whiff of this, if a crumb of this sorry tale gets whispered about in Welkin, I shall know it, and I shall follow the limner and I shall ruin him! I shall see to it that he has no future, no commissions—I shall have the law on him—stealing a man's wife is *thievery*—I shall have him clapped into prison, and you, Emelie, will have yourself to thank! Therefore you will not say *one word* to him concerning my suspicions, lest there be tongues clacking over the singular circumstance of an unfinished painting and a hasty and unexplained departure. *Decorum* is all that can save this house's reputation now, Emelie—*your* decorous behavior. So look you to it!"

I saw that my own meekness had been my undoing: irrational jealousy that is submitted to only grows the lustier. I said: "It is *wicked* that Mr. Rhys may suffer for something he never did! It is grossly unjust that he *or* I should be damned for sins uncommitted!"

"I have seen you look at him," Mr. Carson said hoarsely. "*Succubus*!"

I do not know this word, and I was silenced. (Could I write my father and ask him what it means? "Mr. Carson used it to me . . . it does not have the ring of endearment . . .") But what further protest could I make? The truth: "I was only looking at him—" Even if my husband believed me (and he would not believe me) he would call it sin. He holds that *to think evil* is the first step to Hell, and all who take that road are already damned. (Mr. Carson's Purgatory must be mightily overpopulated.)

But I can see that to urge my love to leave before the painting is done will only bring him anguish later. I must say nothing more.

November 19th

Last night Mr. Carson commenced again on his obsession. "The Law does not condemn us until we do the

evil," he told me, "but God, Emelie, looks into our hearts and considers our desires. He judges us by which way we would *wish* to go, as well as by which way we *do*. In the eyes of the Law, Emelie, you are not an adulteress until you have lain with another, but in the eyes of God, once your thoughts stray, you are a Sinner. But *I* do not forsake you—I will try to save you. Confess—confess to me your wrongful thoughts and commence your repentance! God sees, God knows—"

"Then *God knows*," I cried, as I had once before, but this time aloud and most fervently, "I would be a faithful wife!"

"You compound your sin." His lips drew back as if he had a great thirst. "Do not add sin to sin by swearing falsely."

"I would—I *would* be a faithful wife!" I cried again.

"*Would* you?" said Mr. Carson. "Can you swear, as you hope to avoid the flames of Hell, can you swear, your soul at stake, that you never wished for other arms than mine about you?" His great shoulders bore me down, and I was not so daft as to do other than submit, be yielding, compliant, *domesticated*: the easier I made his ingress, the sooner he would be done. "Swear it!" he said, his voice thick with passion.

I did swear it. God forgive me, my love forgive me, I swore it. And as I swore, I was punished. For that which *had been* true—and it *had been*: I had never permitted myself to long for your embrace, my love, never!—at once was no longer so. My whole being cried out for you, and I did ache with longing.

So do I now. God forgive me! God help me!

November 22nd

"Your lover is a demon painter," my husband says to me in the night. "If ever I saw a face with consciousness of sin staring from the eyes, Emelie, it is your face in this last portrait—"

"If I am staring at sin," I say, "it is not mine but yours! For you will not believe your wife innocent, you talk of destroying an innocent man—you boast you will blacken his name—"

"No, I can do nothing!" says Mr. Carson in a fury. "If only I could destroy his reputation without destroying my

own—if only I could see him in prison! For he is no better than a common criminal—he has stolen what is not his, he has made my wife his whore, he—”

“Not true, not true, not true!” I say.

I might as well be pleading with the wind.

November 23rd

I told my love: I had to. Our hurried exchange was a familiar litany of despair: “You must go! You must go!” “I cannot leave without you!” “I cannot leave the child!”

We gazed out at the snow that heaved about the house like an angry sea. “Constance could not endure a quarter of a mile,” he said. “And who would shelter us—a runaway wife, a rogue stealing a man’s child as well? Our only course is to persuade your husband he is mistaken. I shall confront him with your innocence—”

“No—no, you must not! He told me to say nothing to you—he will be enraged that I disobeyed!”

“I beg you, don’t be so distressed. I sha’n’t let him know you appealed to me. Come—smile, my sweet—how can I paint you, and you grieving?”

“How can I smile, when I am so afraid?”

“Please, Mistress Carson, be comforted! Please—or I shall curse myself as the cause of your tears!”

“I am ashamed to be so—so lachrymose,” I said. “I know it is tedious of me—you must commence to regret the day you came to Tamarack—indeed, I should think you did already!”

“Never that!” He looked at me as if I were a light that hurt his eyes. “No, never!” he said again.

“Never what?” said my husband’s harsh voice in the doorway. “And why sit you snivelling, Emelie? Mr. Rhys is most anxious to be on his way, and you delay him with your vapours, for is it not his boast that he can paint only what he sees?”

“You wife, sir,” said Mr. Rhys sturdily, “fears that I will impose on her portrait some false look, some emotion to which she is a stranger, and this will displease you. Never, say I. She is a lady of courage, beauty, and unstained virtue—that is what I see when I look upon her face, as God is my witness—”

“Have a care, Mr. Rhys—God can look into your heart, and hers!”

"I know it, sir," said Mr. Rhys. "I only wish you could, too. You would not torment yourself this way, nor her."

"Look on her face, Mr. Rhys! She wears her bridal white, but what she sees before her are her own broken vows—"

"Nay, Mr. Carson," said my love. "What she sees before her is a husband who will not believe in her innocence—who will not listen to her pleas—who refuses to see that his own love for her may have made him too fearful of losing her!"

It is no use, my love, my darling. He will listen to nothing, he is convinced you are my lover, nothing you can do and nothing I can say will change him. Why should we *not* be, then? If I am to suffer the consequences, could I not have the cause?

November 24th

In the night the wind shifted to the south and the rain commenced to fall. Mr. R has struggled up this morning, and Mrs. R as well. Constance ran to the kitchen to greet them. Mr. R and Mr. Carson went down to the barns to shovel off the rain-soaked snow, lest it collapse a building. And I donned my white gown, and seated myself before the crimson hangings, and spread my skirts, and looked at my love. I gazed at him with all my heart and with all my soul.

"I have thought all night what to do," he said in a low voice. "I am torn apart. First I think I will ask Levi to make me some webbed snowgear, and on some pretext expect a second pair, and then somehow dress you in garments like a Mohawk, and flee with you into York State—but this is wildest fancy. Romantic rubbish." He studied my face, and set several strokes with care. "And then I beguile myself with the thought that we can get as far as Welkin unmolested, there to catch the mail coach just as it is leaving. We will go to Portsmouth, or to Boston, and dash aboard some vessel as she sets sail—"

"He would come after us," I said. "He would travel faster than we ever could—he would catch us—"

"Yes, his pride would send him after us. He would follow us wherever we fled. And when he brought you back here—for how could I prevent it?—your life would be ten times worse than it is now—fifty times worse. No, I

cannot bring you to ruin, my darling. I must finish, and I must go, and you—you must forget me—”

“Forget you? Are you then going to forget me? My life is in ruins, my dearest love,” I whispered. “When you leave, my life is over. You are all I know of happiness, or tenderness, or laughter, or—or friendship! Oh my love my love, hold me close! I am so alone!”

He held me, and I could hear his heart pounding as if to leap through his ribs, and he breathed as if he'd been running.

And shameless shameless I pressed my cheek against his and I whispered, “Oh please, my dearest, just once—just *once*—I must—I *must* have a few moments' bliss to hold, for the rest of my life—oh please, oh please don't deny me—”

He thrust me back, staring at my face as a starving man beholds food. “No,” he said hoarsely, “I cannot deny you, poor darling—poor starving. I have not the strength to deny you what *I* want more than life itself!” And he put me down, and strode to the door, shut it, set a chair before it, and came back to me . . .

I shall not write what transpired next. It is not so much my husband's eyes I fear, for I can hide my Journal from him, and there is always the fire . . . No, it is the Devil's eyes I dread, for hide my Journal clever as Cain, Satan's eyes will seek it out, and know my sin. It must be sin, so lovely . . . so beautiful is my love, so strong, so gentle, so beautiful, his eyes so gentle, so warm, so loving . . . All-merciful God if there be a child spare the child. The sin is mine, *mine*—not my beloved's, blame him not, he but pitied me in my distress, and wished to comfort me . . .

If I burn my Journal, still Satan will be able to read its pages.

It does seem cruel beyond measure, to be condemned to Hell for trespassing close to Heaven.

November 25th

Perhaps Satan watched, and whispered in my husband's ear. For we were in our usual tableau this morning, I seated, staring at nothing, staring at the storm which beat against the windows, Constance bent over her needlework, and Mr. Rhys silent-faced like a man in

prison painting steadily and with a fierce concentration (as if the completion of this task was his only hope of release), when Mr. Carson appeared in the doorway, took three strides into the room and pronounced sentence: "I shall not play the wittoll!" said he in an awful voice. As abruptly as he came, he went out.

Something of his passion, of the extremity of his rage, communicated itself to Constance, for she blanched with fear—all the progress of the past months was lost in an instant—and she whispered, "What—what is that, New-Mother?"

I went to her and I stroked her hair. "I don't know, my darling," I said. Which was the truth; I had never heard the word before.

"It is a man who knows his wife's adultery and submits to it," said Parsloe Rhys, as if someone had him by the throat.

"Constance," said I, "I think I hear Mrs. Ransom in the kitchen—run down and greet her—"

"She has not come," Constance said, still trembling like the tamaracks when a fitful wind springs up. "It snows again!"

"I think perhaps she has. I think I heard the door slam."

"No, it was my father. He goes to the barn, New-Mother."

"Please, Constance, go and see—my dearest child—my little mouse—" My voice broke.

When we were alone, my love said in a voice of anguish, "Oh, God forgive me—I have pulled the house down around you both!"

"It would have collapsed of itself," I said. "It was built on quicksand."

"Come away," said he. "Now—at once—this very hour!"

"I cannot leave her," I said, "and with her we would not get as far as Welkin. No, you must go—go somewhere and wait for me. Say where you will be and I will come."

"I go away in safety and in freedom, doing nothing, saying nothing—no, by God! I will leave word—on these boards your face shall accuse him—he shall not have this 'Madonna' falsely prophesying—" and he seized his brush and before I knew what he was about, he had obliterated

the babe's face and then he commenced to erase the child's body, using colours like the gown, thus emptying my arms of the infant I had (presumably) presented to my husband a year hence.

"Mr. Rhys!" I said in tones of dread. "You will only enrage him the more!"

"Let the world see what manner of husband he is!" said Mr. Rhys in a fury, painting as if possessed by demons. And with a dozen further strokes, he altered my expression: instead of a 'Madonna', there sat I: empty-armed (as I have said), a mother bereaved, wracked by grief.

Mr. Rhys then turned back to the 'Christening Party'. "I'll do better if you don't sit where I must see you," said he. "Go change your gown, my love—that white reminds me of a shroud—and comfort yourself with your Journal. In an hour's time I shall be done, and then—" He broke off, staring at me as if he had no notion of how to finish his sentence.

I went to him and kissed him on the lips. "Say where you shall be and I will come," I said again. "Wait for me—I will come when I can, I know not how—"

He set down his brush and palette on the writing table, and he took me in his arms, and he kissed me again and again. "Yes," he said, as a man accepts water when he dies of thirst. "Yes, my beloved." He took my face in his hands and kissed me once again. "Now go," he said, and released me.

I changed my gown to my grey wool, and took my Journal and went down to the kitchen to attend to Constance. She was attempting to make tea, and insisted (tearfully) that she could do so. I thought it wiser to allow her to struggle than to step in and do everything with adult ease.

So now I sit at the trestle table putting down everything that has happened today, as an offering, I think, like those prayers pagans write out so laboriously on little pieces of paper and then burn before their gods. But I shall not burn my Journal, not yet.

The kettle is slow to come to a boil—something to do with the draft, no doubt, for the storm is heavy, and the room consequently dark and smoky. When Constance has the tea ready, I will take Mr. Rhys's to him, I say,

and put away my Journal, for her father will soon be back and wanting his midday meal. Why does she not set out a cup for him, it will please him to see her so helpful, I say, and I promise I will not be long.

December 25th

I know the date because Mrs. Ransom, bringing me my food at midday, said hurriedly, backing off as if she was afraid of me (as of course she is: she believes me mad—she believes *him* when he tells her I am mad), "Look in your napkin, there's a dear—I put a present in there for ye. The child says it's yours—she says mebbe you'll be less fretful if'n you kin hold it—" And she was gone, and the key turned, and the bolts shot, and the household is safe again from the mistress of Tamarack, raving in that room overlooking the smoke house, in that room where her face gazes at her from every wall.

He set them in the wall himself, a week afterwards, while I cowered in the corner, crouched in the corner like a crazed thing, for the sight of him so horrified me my legs gave way and I was robbed of speech. It is the only time he has come in this room since, God be thanked.

I do not blaspheme. It is the one small favour God has seen fit to grant me. Perhaps even this is more than I deserve.

When I unfolded the napkin and found my Journal, my first thought was to put it in the fire. And then I could not think why such a truly mad notion could have occurred to me—for did not my love live in its pages? Were we not together, here between the covers of this volume? *Here together, forever and forever, never to be parted?*

And then I thought: *I must put down what happened next. What happened last.*

I could not keep my promise to Constance. I have been a very long time. For I went back up to my sitting room, and I have never left it since.

I found my love just finishing the face in that last painting—the face staring out above the 'bridal' dress, which now did look like a shroud, perhaps because he had painted over all those festive adornments that had graced the bodice. The face above this gown gazed back at me with eyes in which no life stirred, no hope shone; as if I

were damned without hope of forgiveness, as if I could not think how to escape the torment in which I dwelt.

"You will not, of course, recognize what an excellent likeness it is, Mistress Carson," said Mr. Rhys, a raw edge of exultation in his voice. He glanced behind me. "I think you will agree now, *Mister Carson*, I do indeed paint what I see before me! This one is our mutual masterpiece, for it is your work as much as mine. I have—in my own mind only, of course, but you are free to use it if you wish—I have called this portrait '*Mistress of Tamarack*'—" and he turned back to put a last stroke on the cheek.

"No, I do not think that would suit me," said Mr. Carson coolly, and he took up my candle from the stand by his chair and moved over as if to see better, and I, suddenly aware of the extreme danger which threatened, screamed—screamed as Mr. Carson struck one blow with the candlestick—a swift and merciless blow, and the blood gushed from my love's head as he collapsed senseless to the floor, and I screamed and would have run to him but Mr. Carson sent me reeling with one sweep of his arm, to fall against the wall, and screaming I tried to get to my feet as he dragged my love limp as a slaughtered sheep from the room—I clawed my way to my feet and screaming I hurled myself against the door as it was slammed to and the lock turned. And I beat against it with my fists and I screamed.

He dragged my love down the back stairs and along the terrace to the smoke house. I knew where he had put him when I heard him nailing the door shut. I crawled to the window and screaming *No wait wait! No—no wait!* I stared through the blowing snow, and I could see him hammer in hand driving in the nails. And then he strode back to the house, and later in the afternoon I heard him working at my door, and I screamed the more, but when I heard the noise of the metal clicking back and forth, I knew he had put bolts across, and I quieted at last. I crouched by the window and waited for someone to come. Mr. Teagle the mailman. One of the drovers. Mr. Ransom. Anyone. So that I could open the sash and call down that my husband had struck down Mr. Rhys, and he was sorely hurt, and locked in the smoke house.

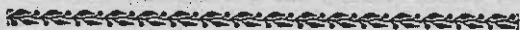
No one came. No one who would listen, who would

believe. The drovers and the herdsmen and the Ransoms, husband and wife—all think me mad. "I put these portraits in here, madam," Mr. Carson said as he fastened them in the wall, "for the sight of them—of my mad wife's face—this record of her disintegration into madness—is too great a grief for me to be reminded of it daily. I have explained to those few who have knowledge of your whereabouts that the bolts are on the door for their protection—theirs and the child's. Fortunately the limner had finished his task here and gone on his way, before my wife was taken with her fit of screaming, I said. As for Constance, who would be so foolish as to believe the stammers of an overwrought child?"

It is a month. Some time since then and now my love must have died. No man, not even so brave a one and full of spirit as my love, could still live, without food or water or warmth, or attention to his hurt. So he has left me, though I did beg him on my knees to wait, to wait for me. From the window as I watched, I begged him to wait.

But I will follow.

Chapter Twenty-seven



Justin left on Thursday, as he said he would. On Thursday, too, the Rowdons moved from Deese Ransom's to the apartment in the barn. I had gone out the day before to give it a combined first and last inspection, and was pleased to see how comfortable they would be in the grooms' quarters now enlarged and modernized. The storage tank for their gas appliances was buried, so there was nothing to offend the eye, Justin told me smoothly. He thought it only fair that my household staff should enjoy a style of living more advanced (though not higher) than my own: I didn't have to carry firewood, or cook

by guess and by God on a wood stove. Meanwhile Tamarack itself would remain unassaulted by delivery trucks, unaffected by fuel scarcities, and independent of power failure. Good, said I.

Justin left on Thursday, and that evening and Friday too all was quiet and I was undisturbed. It wasn't until Saturday, and I was alone, looking over Gam's *Années d'Or* letters before my bedroom fire, that I heard the child again, quite clearly through the walls, too clearly, I thought, for it to be in the Hogarth room; more likely it was in one of the parlors downstairs. I did not go and look. Very quietly, I folded the letters and put them away, and sat before the fire until it was dying and I was stiff with cold; and then I went to bed and lay for a long time watching the moonlight move across the room.

It didn't have to be Emelie Carson's son. Or Catherine O'Reilly's. There were other children born at Tamarack. All those sons of Elizabeth Stearns. Johanna Spooner's babe, born at dawn and dead at sundown (though I would have said it didn't sound like quite so young an infant). Ismay, then? Constance had died at his birth. And then, of course, it might be a child who hasn't yet been born. My child. *Then why don't I comfort it? Am I not there? Have I, too—like Johanna, like Constance—died at its birth?*

On Sunday evening I thought I heard the child somewhere in the east wing. I waited until bright daylight on Monday before (feeling like a trespasser) I went to look.

It could have been the wind, I thought, for here the house was almost empty. The parlors toward the terrace contained an outpost of barrels, nothing more. Upstairs, only the lilacs room was furnished, and still it looked bare despite the cannonball bed, the table with its brass lamp and stack of sketch books. It struck me as strange that it was here in this scantily furnished, shabby, and ill-heated wing, that St. John professed himself so happy to be alone. Was that just a ploy to keep me out? Was *he* hiding something? Some clever electronic device with a—a variable timer and some sort of remote speaker?

I searched everywhere: walls and fireplaces, cupboards, bed, chest-on-chest, washstand—I even took out his bedding roll, and unrolled it, and felt it all over. So

admirably methodical was I, if there'd been anything larger than a folder of matches I'd have found it. But there was nothing: nothing anywhere.

I had left his studio for last, no doubt because it was full of his presence, though he was far away, at least I supposed he was. But here, too, I found nothing—that is, nothing to justify my intrusion. I didn't know whether my failure to find anything sinister left me more relieved or ashamed.

When at last I was satisfied there was nothing to be found, I went over to the harvest table where those folders of his completed drawings lay loosely stacked, and I untied the one on top and with great care turned over the sheets of drawing paper. *Dulichium arundinaceum* . . . *Arisaema Dacontium*. But where was the *Actea rubra*? And the—what was it called? the *Larix laricina*—the tamarack? I looked through the second folder. Odd—neither one was here. But there'd been three folders, hadn't there, that first time (how long ago it seemed now!) when I had come for supper. Perhaps he took the third with him, for some reason.

I glanced around. Despite its sparse furnishings the room had a certain charm. His easel stood next to the north window, and beside it a Bennington jug with a collection of seed stalks: thumbs of milkweed, tassels of purple oats, fists of Queen Anne's lace. There was a Morris chair by the corner fireplace and books in an open cabinet, great leather-bound books, some of them: Gerard's *Herball*, and *Pharmacopoeia Londonensis* as translated by Nicholas Culpeper in 1683; even if these were modern facsimile editions, I thought, they must be quite valuable.

In spite of the fire (a frugal one) the room was too cold for lingering. I borrowed the Gerard and the Culpeper and retreated to my own room, where I amused myself comparing the two. Agrimony (*Agrimonia eupatoria*), Gerard reports, will remove stoppings and obstructions of the liver; the seed taken in wine helps 'the bloody fluxe' and those bitten by serpents, whereas the leaves 'stamped in old swines grease' will 'close up' ulcers. Culpeper declared it 'good for the gout' as well. Ground Ivy, bound in a bundle or chopped like herbs for the pot, 'stays the terms'. I thought of Emelie Carson's face, drained of color: had she been the victim of nothing more

sinister than too rudimentary a knowledge of the ailments of women?

Sheer desperation must have driven our ancestors to all sorts of risky experiments, I reflected: the Common Nettle was cited as effective against poisons, stone in the bladder, whooping cough, and worms in children; whereas the leaves of Periwinkle (*Vinca minor*) when boiled in wine and drunk would stop bleeding, but when eaten by man and wife, 'would cause love between them'. Some ailments are eternal, I thought wryly; only the treatments change: nowadays we trot to marriage counselors, but I doubt the rate of cure has improved much.

That evening after the Rowdons left, compelled by some obscure impulse to prove something to myself, I went boldly across to the east wing and returned the two heavy books to their cabinet. The studio swam in shadow beyond my candle's obscuring light. Deliberately, I locked the connecting door behind me and crossed the library to the curving stair. This was *my* house, and I could go where I pleased *when* I pleased . . .

The great window at the head of the stairs was a multifaceted mirror, a fragmented pool of blackness reflecting my blurred face, my distorted arm holding aloft the candle, whose flame flickered from one pane to another, was now on this side, now that, now before me, now behind—I whirled: had there been a brief stab of light somewhere behind me?

Nothing. Nothing except the central hall crowded with barrels and crates, and at the far end its other great window looking to the north. Cautiously I moved my candle. Of course! That other window . . .

For the first time when (presumably) I was alone in the house, I locked the door to my bedroom. Why on earth had I neglected to buy myself a good flashlight? It would have been both sensible and prudent, whereas this locking of doors—doors *inside* the house!—was a—*a* cowardly retreat, a giving way; it was like being pushed backward step by shameful step.

The next morning as William served my breakfast, I said casually, "William, what could cause odd noises in a house as old as Tamarack?" I glanced up at him and smiled an apology. "I declare I must be getting fanciful," I

said lightly, "but sometimes I think I do hear—I don't know—sort of crying noises . . ."

"Any house will creak in the cold, Mrs. St. John. When the wind comes whinin' across the tops of the chimneys, well, it can put notions in your head. Then when you get complicated chimneys like here—a stove and a fireplace into the same flue, for instance—sometimes it can sound mighty strange."

"Like somebody crying?" I persisted.

"More like a giant with a fearful fit of asthma," William said with a smile. "But I've been meanin' to tell you, ma'am, Grace and I don't mind to sit in the kitchen evenings, while Mr. St. John is away. One more soul under the roof can quiet a house wonderful."

"Thank you, William, but that's really not necessary."

For what if I should hear the child, and the Rowdons not? What would I do then?

Uncertain as to what use I would care to put the Hogarth room, I had finally told the painters to let it go for now. By four o'clock they had completed the rest of their work and had packed up their gear and cleared out. By eight the Rowdons were gone. At nine-fifteen the child cried somewhere in the west wing. I went to bed. Before dawn I thought I heard the child in a north bedroom. I did not stir until I heard the Rowdons come to prepare breakfast. The day passed undisturbed; the evening was quiet; but early Thursday morning I was awakened (so it seemed at first) by the child in the room with me. I lay there in the eerie half-light from the setting moon and told myself I must have been dreaming. And then, very faint and far away, I heard an owl . . . and then again. An owl! Of course! That must have been it—on silent wings it had sailed close to the house and let its blood-chilling cry float into the darkness . . . yes, of course!

It was that same Thursday morning, however, early, before the arrival of Mrs. Gwendolyn Grimes (who was accordingly absolved of all suspicion), that I discovered the second letter was gone from my purse. When I'd reached in for my keys, it occurred to me the bag was somewhat less cluttered than usual. It had taken me a moment or two to remember what ought to be there that was not, and then I had searched repeatedly in that ab-

surd way one does, as if what is missing may materialize between searches.

When was I last sure the letter was there? Not since that Saturday when I'd run into Merrill at the Gallery and we'd gone on to the dress shop. Had I left my bag behind while I tried on that flouncy, bouncy skirt? Probably. She could have taken it. But why would she? Why would anyone?

To be fair, I had to admit that anyone at all who came to Tamarack could have helped himself: any of the painters, or one of the moving men, either of the Rowdons, or Justin, or even Dixon Mansfield, if he were fleet of foot. (Had we left Dixon alone at all, when he was here with that first load of furniture? I didn't think so.)

Well, at least it wasn't Mrs. Gwendolyn Grimes, I thought as William produced her. Since she was to do the laundry as well as the heavy cleaning, she could commence with the boxes of bedding, he suggested, that is, if I had finished checking them against my list. So for her benefit I emptied several of the boxes lining the upstairs hall; and after lunch, when the Rowdons were leaving, I agreed Mrs. Grimes could stay and finish what she'd started that morning, if that was what she wished, especially since she had arranged not to leave until five; and I went on unpacking a crate of silver hollowware in one of the cramped south parlors of the east wing.

Some time later she appeared in the doorway and looked at me inquiringly. I said pleasantly enough, "Yes, what is it?"

"I thought you called, ma'am. Excuse me."

"Well, I didn't," I said, a bit impatiently, I'm afraid.

"I thought I heard you callin', or cryin', sort of."

I stared at her. "Where—where were you?" *Crying—someone else had heard the crying!* Dear God, I hadn't imagined it! This sturdy and commonsensical woman had heard it, too!

"I was firin' up that water heater in the cellar. I thought maybe it was somethin' in the chimney, but then I thought I better come and see if you was okay. This house," she said simply, "is one hell of a ways from another house, ain't it?"

I beamed at her. "It must have been the chimney, as you say."

She nodded. "You'd be awful far from help if they was to catch fire. My brother-in-law cleans chimneys. Would you like for me to see if he c'n work you in?"

So *that* was it—just a ploy to get work for her kinfolk! I said coldly, "Thank you, I'll speak to William and see if he thinks it necessary."

That night the child cried throughout the night. Faintly, intermittently, now overhead, while I sat in the dining room over my solitary meal, now in the far parlor, now in the west wing, always weak, always hopeless, and (obviously) meaning me no harm. Dear God! I thought then, am I becoming accustomed to its presence here? Has it become just one of those things one learns to accept?

The next morning I put it to William that perhaps we ought to have the chimneys cleaned, as a prudent gesture before we got any further into winter. He agreed readily, and said he would arrange it with Mrs. Grimes's sister's husband. It was only after it was all settled that I wondered what I would do if, when the cleaning was done and the swallow's nest or squirrel's nest or whatever was gone, the crying persisted.

On Monday morning we let all the fires go out, but Mrs. Grimes's brother-in-law did not put in an appearance until early afternoon, by which time the house was growing decidedly chilly. He and his helper began to hook together a series of poles, attaching at one end a stiff-bristled gadget like a gigantic bottle brush. They provided blankets to cover the fireplaces that had no dampers, and William said he would arrange these as needed, and would close off the dampers in the east wing as well.

I could hear the gentle bump of a ladder being placed against the eaves, and then footsteps on the roof, and then voices. A few minutes later Grace knocked on my bedroom door where I sat reading.

"They've got to come in here. Those hoods over the chimneys means they can't use their poles, they've got to use ropes, and somebody has to haul on them from below."

I was a bit apprehensive until I saw how cautiously both men went about their work, what care they took to keep the blanket over the fireplace and with what pa-

tience they eased the rope past it. I could hear a steady falling of debris like a dry and gusty rain.

"I'll sweep out the fireplace," Grace informed the intruder when they were done, her voice stiff with disapproval.

He was folding the blanket, taking care to keep the sooty side in. "Usually we just slap our big vacuum cleaner in there," he said cheerfully. "Sucks everything up and that's it, neat as a pin. Power company won't run a line in, huh?"

"We like it this way," I said coldly.

When Grace had my room tidy again, William relit the fire. Daylight was already fading. Soon we would light the lamps and I would pull Tamarack around me like a friend's embrace . . . Again there was a knock at my door. The anguish in Grace's voice shattered my peace.

"Something terrible has happened! Simply terrible! You better come—God only knows what Mr. St. John will say!"

A clutch of people was gathered in the library before the door to the east wing. Mrs. Grimes, the chimney sweeps, and William—William literally wringing his hands—were gazing horror-struck into the studio. Grace's description was no exaggeration. It *was* terrible—simply terrible!

Black soot fanned out from the fireplace in the corner and lay thick over everything in the room. Nothing escaped: Justin's easel, his paints in orderly array on the shelves, his folders of finished paintings, his stack of drawing paper, his canvases, his Morris chair with its cushions, his books—his beloved botanys, his beautiful leather-bound herbals . . .

"I closed the damper, Mrs. St. John," William said in a strangled whisper. "Somehow it must of fallen open."

Mrs. Grimes said defensively, "Bert here says the flues in the rest of the house'd been looked after, but not these here. He says these were choked all the way down—they had to use the chain."

"They'd ought to put those blankets up even when there's a damper," Grace remarked to nobody in particular.

"Yes," I said faintly. "It's too dark to do anything to-

night, William. We'd best leave everything as it is until daylight."

There was no sound from the child that night, as well I knew, because I couldn't sleep. *His books! His paintings! His years of work!*

I breakfasted next morning by candlelight. The sky was overcast and at nine-thirty the light was still weak. We had just begun to brush up the worst from the floor when the sound of a car—the Audi, of course: what else had that self-confident purr?—made my heart plunge. He'd said the eighteenth, and it *was* the eighteenth, but couldn't he please dear God have got back just in time for dinner?

William went out after the luggage.

"Hullo, William. Tell Grace I'd like breakfast, please. I had an early start and drove straight through. Oh, and these go to Mrs. St. John's room."

William marched past, his arms full of boxes. A moment later Justin was in the hall.

"Well, Emelie? No cordial words of welcome? Am I too soon?"

"Yes," I said in a strangled voice. "Come s-see what's happened. We've—we've hardly started—" I led the way along the path of newspapers to the east wing. As I flattened myself against the opened door, I made myself look at him.

For a long moment he gazed into the room beyond. Then he looked at me, and his eyes were without depth, black and opaque and cold, cold as the iron-hard ground in the graveyard.

"No doubt you have some explanation prepared."

"We—we were having the chimneys cleaned."

"And?"

"And s-something went wrong."

"That's all you have to say? 'Something went wrong?'"

"The—the damper—s-somehow it got loose—"

"Mr. St. John," William said from the doorway, "I was the one that shut that damper. This is entirely my fault—"

"Was it your idea to clean the chimneys?"

"No, it was mine," I said.

"Shut that door as you leave," Justin told him, "and see if we could possibly be undisturbed in here for five minutes."

He stalked past me into his studio. Hands clasped behind his back, he paced slowly past his easel, his shelves of supplies, the Morris chair, pausing to stare at the bouquet of seeds—a pastiche of blacks in fantastic configurations—and then to the center table, where, delicacy itself, he lifted one corner of the folder and looked under, then gently laid it down again.

"I wonder if you know what you've done?"

"I know," I said huskily. "I—I didn't dare look at them." I gave a great sob. "Oh *God*, Justin—are they ruined?"

"I don't know yet. Perhaps not. Perhaps it's just the edges—I don't want to look until I get the cover cleaned off. Just tell me this—" As he strolled toward me a nerve jumped in his cheek; I shrank back against the wall. "Why were you in such a hell of a rush to have the chimneys cleaned? What gave you the idea it must be done now, that it couldn't wait until I got back?" When I said nothing, he went on softly, "William says he closed the damper. I've no doubt he did. Did it fall open by itself, or did someone open it, I wonder? Someone who resents my presence, who is happy when I leave—"

"No!" I choked. "That's not true! I—I *hate* it when you're away—when you're here there's never any baby crying and anyway I wouldn't ever *touch* one of your beautiful drawings—you *can't* think I would do anything like this to d-destroy them!" I was sobbing openly now. "I c-can't stand to think of them d-damaged—I can't *stand* it—"

"What do you mean, when I'm here there's no baby crying? What the hell are you talking about?"

"That's why I—why I g-got the chimneys cleaned!" I groped for a tissue and mopped my face; it came away slightly black. "I kept hearing that child crying and I thought maybe it was the wind in a—a blocked chimney—"

"*What* child, damn it! You mean like when you thought you heard something—Mrs. what's-her-face—Tessie Ragdoll's baby—only she didn't have one?"

"Yes," I said. "I keep hearing the baby. I don't understand it—there's never anything there—but I *really* hear it, I really *do* hear it—" I sound like a broken record, I

thought. Cracked in the head. I fished out a clean tissue and blew my nose.

"Perhaps you did hear something," he said slowly, though his eyes were hard. "It's possible—God knows a fisher cat can scare the daylights out of you if you don't know his cry, though I wouldn't think he'd come that near the house." He turned to survey the room once again. "Keep your cleaning woman out of here," he said stonily. "William and I will attend to this."

"Mrs. Grimes is a good worker."

"I've no doubt she is. It happens I don't want anybody messing around my paints, or my drawings, or my books. I *must* have some place that's mine!" he said harshly. "Can't you grasp that simple point?"

"I know," I said in a low voice. "Everybody needs some private place where they're safe—" My voice broke.

After a moment he said evenly, "You might go and take a look at the clothes I selected. And ask William to come here, if you will." He went over to the folder on the table and stood looking down at it, not touching it. All my anguish swept over me again and I gave a little hiccup of distress. Without looking up, he said in a low voice, "Let me get at this by myself, at my own pace and in my own way."

I gave William Justin's message and crept up to my room. There on the bed were four large boxes with the kind of scrawled signature, or single flower, or whatever, that marked them as coming from some chic boutique. It seemed to me I ought not to be opening such boxes when I had just been the cause of so enormous a disaster—it was a perverse kind of punishment.

It took me a few moments to realize everything was for evening wear and would be warm: gowns in mauve velvet, or pale gray ribbed silk, or black and white cotton quilting like Spanish embroidery; some high at the throat and with long close-fitting sleeves; others with shawls in silk or in the softest of wools. There was a cloud-light tunic in palest apricot and aquamarine and lavender to be worn over copper velvet pants that wrapped snugly at the ankle like bicycling trousers. Everything was beautiful, and exquisitely made, and no doubt hideously expensive, I thought, and a panicky feeling began to flutter beneath my ribs. I certainly didn't need *seven* such outfits

to ward off the cold of an evening! Actually, of course, I didn't need even one. Whatever was he thinking of? I couldn't accept them—I simply couldn't be obligated in this way! I would tell him so at lunch. In a nice way, of course, but firmly. And with finality.

He forestalled me. "About the clothes," he said, over the soup. "I trust they are something you can wear?"

"They're lovely, of course," I said, "but of course I can't possibly keep them."

"Don't they fit?"

"I didn't try them on, of course," I said.

"What do you mean, 'of course'? If you don't like my taste, for God's sake be frank and say so!"

We're both of us haunted, I thought in what was for me a rare moment of insight. "*Oh, but I couldn't possibly wear that, Justin, my sweet!*"—I could just hear her.

"I didn't know such clothes existed," I said. "I didn't try them on because I can't let you spend that kind of money on me even if you *can* afford it, and I don't see how you can—" I gave a nervous laugh—"when you've already spent so much fixing up Tamarack—"

"Emelie, I am not a child," Justin said coldly. "Nor do I recall anything in our agreement that requires me to give you an accounting of what I spend."

I said desperately, "But not on *me*—you aren't to spend it on *me*!"

"We've been all over that, and I don't care to discuss it further. I thought I made it plain I don't wish to be embarrassed—or bored—by my wife's appearance." He allowed his eyes to travel over my tired sweater, my faithful slacks. "I've also ordered some trousers, since you seem to like them, and I daresay they're practical. It'll take a week or so; they're being made to measure. Oh yes, and a decent coat. I can't afford to have my wife shivering from cold," he drawled. "It causes talk."

My wife, my wife—first person possessive. "*My mother carried firewood, my wife shall not . . .*"

"Justin, I wish you wouldn't *use* me this way. I suppose when you were a child your mother never had such clothes, and now you're trying to compensate. Well, can't you see I don't want to accept what I'm in no way entitled to? It makes me feel so *fake*—"

"My mother never had a warm enough coat in her life.

What has that to do with you? Nothing. Now will you try on those damned dresses to see if they fit, and wear whatever I buy you without all these idiotic scenes, of which I am getting heartily tired. I see no essential difference," he added cuttingly, "between meeting your taxes, roofing your house, buying your food, paying your servants, and clothing you. It does not and will not change the relationship between us one iota, which is—as you so effectively keep reminding me, my dear Emelie—strictly commercial, and shall remain so."

I rose. "Everything you say is true," I said in a low voice, "but need you *say* it? I think a demon dances on your tongue! Before we married, you always made it possible for me to accept a favor as if I were conferring it—now you couldn't care less about my feelings! Were you hoping for more in return than you're getting?"

There'd been a demon on *my* tongue, that's for sure, I thought as I went up the curving stair. What on earth had I meant by that last remark? Not the obvious, though I supposed that was the way he took it. Rather that the right to come and go in Tamarack was not the pleasure he'd expected it to be. Because, rightly or wrongly, he didn't feel welcome. It was a rare talent of mine, I thought bitterly, to make a man feel unwanted, even as a friend.

Dutifully I tried on the beautiful clothes; each fit beautifully. Wasn't there any way I could return at least some of the favors he did me? Perhaps then he would feel more appreciated; at the very least I wouldn't be so deeply in his debt.

At that moment I happened to glance at the table by the window, where in the soft light from the overcast sky Pentacost's heron stood poised as if for flight. Of course! Something rare and lovely, like the heron, priceless because it could not be bought . . . I would go and dicker with Pentacost and see if I could persuade him (barter with him, for he scorned money) to make Justin something—for Christmas, I'd say. There were nearly two hours of daylight left; I'd go at once, this very afternoon.

The woods were lovely, like a tapestry, patched with white where the sun had not melted the snow, and embroidered with featherstitches of coarse green where the Christmas fern patterned the southern slopes. Blue jays

flittered angrily from tree to tree ahead of me, their plumage vivid against the secret depths of the hemlocks. As I approached the burial ground I could see Pentacost's 'larder' through the lilac, now bare of leaves. The door sagged on rusted hinges and was propped shut with the handle of his spade. He at least feels no need for locks, I thought in envy, not even for his secret cache.

I found him seated on his doorstep where he had dumped a pile of skins—rabbit, I supposed—as a cushion against the cold. He gave a pat to the pile next to him, and said, "Sit ye down, Emmy, lass, and tell me what brings ye." He smiled slyly. "For it's a favor ye want, isn't it?"

I laughed and confessed it was. "Would you make me something to give Justin for Christmas? Something no one else can make him? That's always the best present, isn't it?"

"The *best* is what nobuddy but *you* kin make him, ain't that so? But there ain't time for that, be there? Not this year."

"I—what?" I stammered.

"Ye knows what I mean, so don't get to blushin' and playin' coy. A *babe* is the best gift for Christmas a woman kin give a man—for certain a man like Justin anyways, who should ought to have his sons by now. Such a lot he's got to teach 'em, he'd ought to be about it. 'Course ye can't *finish* the job by Christmas, but mebbe ye've started?"

"Not—not yet," I said, my face scarlet. "What I—what I had in mind was that you might carve him something—"

"If things ain't goin' right by spring, you tell me, Emmy, lass. I knows somethin' about herbs 'n' simples—don't ye git to frettin', it's no good, only makes matters worse—"

"Pentacost, *please*—we haven't been married two months yet!" Was everybody in Welkin speculating too? No doubt . . . not only speculating, but watching my figure, to see if it was commencing to thicken . . . which it might already be doing, of course, if we'd anticipated our marriage during that month or so Justin had been my boarder. I said crisply, "Think of something to carve for Justin—something you know he'd like to have—and I'll

pay you for it. I'll—I know what!—I'll bring you your dinner from now until Christmas—how's that? At noon every day, something hot—" And a good excuse to avoid meeting Justin at lunch, I thought.

Pentacost had leaped to his feet and was cavorting about in an ecstatic little jig. "Done!" he cried. "Ye've got yourself a bargain! I'll carve a real beauty of a frame, how's that? He's paintin' your picture surely—you sneak in on the sly, like, and measure it—"

"He is *not* painting my picture, I thought he made that plain enough! He's not doing portraits, Pentacost—he's working on—" I could see in my mind's eye the soot, smirching everything—"he's still doing his d-drawings of plants—"

"Well, don't ye fret, Emmy, lass, he'll take a good look at ye one of these days an' then he'll paint ye, see if he don't," Pentacost said comfortingly. "I knows what I'm gonna make—somethin' he specially wants, ye say? For *sure* I knows what he's got his heart set on! But I'm not sayin'—it'll be a surprise, that's the best way—but ye'll be so pleased ye'll give me another o' them birdlike kisses o' yours!"

I laughed. "All right, I leave it to you!" I got to my feet. "Tell me, Pentacost," I said on impulse, "you probably know most of the tales told about Tamarack, don't you? Did you ever hear if it's supposed to be haunted?"

He laid his finger along his nose. "Tamarack? Yes, indeed, haunted—well, I should say so!"

"Which—which part of the house?"

"Ye means inside? I never heard tell of no haunts *inside*. It's along the terrace he goes, and down to the lake, and up to the burial ground, just when it's gittin' dark. There he goes with his candle and there he stands by her grave. But shucks, lass, he don't bother the women, that's what I bin told. It's the men he don't like, circlin' round an' circlin' round his wives. Jealous ol' Jehosephat, he was—"

"You mean . . . Israel Carson?"

"Well, whoever else are we talkin' about? Nobuddy oughta blame him none, if he goes walkin' about, frettin' an' frettin' on account of nobuddy done a damn thing about him bein' murdered."

"Israel Carson was murdered? Dear God, I would have said he was the *doer*, not the *done-by*!"

"That's what Martha told me," Pentacost said. "An' *she* hadn't any reason to go makin' it up, on account of murder in the fambly ain't much to boast of, I wouldn't think. Her brother Luke told her their grandfather Trueblood—you kin see his grave along in there, if ye've a mind to—Trueblood killed his own father on his wedding day. Married his half-sister and killed his father—kinda busy, damn all, packin' all that into one sunup, sundown—but no more conscience than a cat, because *he* don't stir none from under his stone, Emmy—Trueblood don't. Don't *you* worry, lass. With the Carsons, the *doers* all sleep like babes in arms—it's the *done-byes*, like you say, those they *done* wrong to, those they hurt or put aside or killed—they're the restless ones." He nodded reassuringly. "But never inside the house. No, that's for sure. Martha would've told me."

Chapter Twenty-eight



By ten o'clock Christmas morning Pentacost still hadn't brought Justin's present, and I was getting very nerved up about it. I had done my part: I'd walked over every day with his dinner, and I'd enjoyed these walks. Some days it would be cloudy, and the woods otherworldly and unreal, a silent landscape of shadowless grays and whites through which I moved as in a dream, my steps muffled by the conspiracy of snow. On other days the sun was blinding, the sky brilliant, and the jays shouting *Mel! Mel! Mel!* in a fit of jealousy, as if one should admire no other blue but theirs. But always when I neared the graveyard, the thoughts that nagged at me in Tamarack would catch up, to bedevil me the rest of the way . . .

Once—Friday the twenty-first, it was, the day of least daylight—I had squeezed past the gate stuck halfway

open in the snow and I'd gone over to Gam's grave, where I'd stood for a moment, searching for something to tell her. And I couldn't think of anything. I couldn't talk about the letters, nor about the Hogarth room where I now hated to go because of those portraits. I couldn't ask her what Pentacost meant by saying Trueblood murdered his father—it was bad enough that he'd married his half-sister, but I couldn't talk about that, either, because it meant that Gam and I were doubly descended from Israel Carson, a man who may have driven his young bride out of her mind. It's a phrase we use too glibly, I thought: *you're driving me out of my mind* . . . God forbid, if it means the horror, the grief, the despair I read in Emelie Stark's face!

Just the same, I stopped to see Gam the next day, and the next. It seemed rude and unfeeling to hurry past, and so I'd go in, and circle carefully around Trueblood's stone (for he truly horrified me), and I'd go over by Gam, not saying anything, just being there, in case she were lonely; and then I would walk on back to Tamarack.

On the day before Christmas I showed William which little spruce I had selected—it was a shapely tree about five feet high—and he cut it for me, and mounted it on a simple stand. I had him put it in the south parlor, and I decorated it with the rather skimpy collection of ornaments I dug out of a carton in the attic. Handling them with great care, I put a chipped gilt bell on one branch, a frazzled angel on another, and tried not to think of how, when I was a child, we had decorated our tree together, my mother and my father and I, laughing over the confusion of the boxes, arguing where the lights should go; and there were carols on the phonograph, and the house sweet with greenery and spicy with pudding. I felt as if I were living on two time levels, and the scrape of the lid as I opened another box of ornaments was loud to my ears.

"It needs lights," Justin remarked from the doorway. "Didn't that catalog list 'Box w. misc. Xmas dec. incl. cndl hldrs'?"

"You sound as if you're speaking in tongues," I laughed. "Yes, there they are, on the settee, but there aren't any candles."

"William could go after some in Welkin."

"Isn't it awfully dangerous, real candles on a tree?"

"We'll only light them the once, and I'll stand by with a bucket of water if that will make you any easier." He was circling the tree slowly, his hands in his pockets. "I remember three trees we had when I was a child. One had only strings of popcorn, and one had popcorn and cranberries, but the third one—that was the year my father died—that one didn't have anything on it but the candles. We set it up outside in the yard, where there was room for it—you know, rammed it into the snow—and my mother bought a box of birthday candles and I stuck them to the branches with melted parafin and we lit them. God, it was so beautiful—thirty-three little flames dancing against the blackness and the cold. One for each year of her Savior's life, my mother said, for she didn't have benefit of the scholarship which gives Him thirty-seven." He laughed briefly, for no reason that I could see. "They burned for maybe three or four minutes, maybe not that long. And then the tree caught, and the flames leaped from branch to branch until it was one great candle. We stood watching until it was quite burnt out." He picked up a silvered walnut, and stood turning it over as if curious how it was made. "And then my mother said, 'For once enough light for the Christ Child to find all the souls He leads to Heaven!' She believed, you see, that the ghosts of everyone who died during the last year had been wandering around since All Saints' Day—my father's too, I suppose—and had to be rounded up and led off." He dropped the nut back.

William returned with cranberries and popcorn, but without candles—there were only the huge ones fat as baseball bats, he said. I spent the evening stringing the berries and the popped corn, and then before I went to bed I lit a single candle. I set it in a large bowl so that if it tipped it could do no harm, and I put the bowl on a table well away from any drafts yet placed where the flame could be clearly seen from down by the lake, perhaps even across to the graveyard. So her Christ Child could see His way, I thought, and lead Gam to Heaven, in case she wasn't there already.

In the morning I went to early church, taking the Rowdons, who said (when asked) they would like to go. And then we came home, and as I say, I was getting truly

nerved up because Pentacost had not yet come with Justin's present. Beneath the tree were three large packages, one for Grace, one for William, and (to compound my distress) one for me.

"Justin, you already gave me my Christmas presents!" I said. "All those beautiful, *beautiful* clothes!"

"Oh, is that why you haven't worn them? Whatever gave you the idea they were for Christmas? Now stand back so William can open his; I want to see if he likes it."

It was one of those glass structures that turn an ordinary window into a greenhouse, and it appeared William liked it very much.

"It's for that south window in your sitting room," Justin said.

"Thank you very much, sir—sir and madam. This will surely shorten the winter!"

For Grace there was a soft and fleecy afghan in shades of rose. She thanked us both primly—"Mr. St. John, and you, too—" glancing at me; I could see my name on the card as well as his, in Justin's beautiful script. I nodded my head graciously.

When they had left the room I clutched my unopened box and said, "That was really awfully nice of you, to include me in your—your truly generous gesture. Justin, honestly—you shouldn't give me one thing more! Oh, I can't *stand* it!"

"Good God, I didn't mean to make you unhappy," Justin said. "Cheer up and open your present."

It was a robe in apricot velvet and a nightgown of so pale a tint its satin was almost—almost but not quite—white. Like the tamaracks, I thought, veiled in snow . . .

I said huskily, "It's—they're beautiful!"

"I'm grateful you're sparing me an encore of your usual, 'How *dare* you!'" he said dryly.

I looked up at him then, and I daresay my face matched my hair. The notion had crossed my mind he must have imagined me wearing them. "I *ought* to refuse it, I know I ought." I bit my lip. "But I don't seem to have enough strength of character." I touched the velvet; it was unbelievably soft.

"Emelie," he said seriously, "there are times when to refuse a gift would be both stupid and cruel." He hesi-

tated, then went on: "I bought that for you because a man needs to be able to buy such things for someone, especially at Christmas."

Dear God, I thought, what about Boston . . . or Montreal?

"Oh, *why* doesn't Pentacost come?" I burst out. "He has your present—I mean, he's making it—he *promised* it by today!"

"You could give me a hint," Justin said, smiling.

I pretended to be adamant. "No, you have to wait!" And wished fervently I had insisted Pentacost tell me what it was!

One custom I was not going to re-establish from my childhood was that of leaving gifts on display all Christmas Day. I carried the robe and gown to my room; I didn't want Gordon Fenwick (or anybody else) laying eyes on them. Mindful that Justin's reputation was at stake, I changed out of my church-going black, choosing the moss-green jersey; it was high in the neck and long of sleeve, and although it sort of draped it also flowed, and I thought I would be more comfortable in it than in any of the others, considering Gordon Fenwick's tendency to Romanize.

We had dinner at midday, of roast goose (store-bought) and plum pudding, and then Justin remarked he thought he'd go for a walk—what time had Gordon said they'd be here?

I said, "I suggested any time after three."

"That gives me more than an hour. I'm running out of specimens—God, winter's hardly begun and already I feel pent in!"

He had changed into suitable clothes and was hauling on his boots by the terrace door when a vehicle could be heard negotiating the drive to the house.

"If that's the Fenwicks, they're damned previous," Justin remarked irritably.

It was indeed the Fenwicks. William ushered them into the south parlor and as I went forward to greet them, Gordon Fenwick seized my hand in his bear's paw and pulled me toward him, whisking out a sprig of mistletoe as he did so. Before I could jerk myself free he had planted a great wet smack on my cheek; it would have been on my mouth, but I twisted my face aside.

"Merry Chris'mas," he said thickly. "Merry merry merry Chris'mas to my pretties' kissin' cousin!"

"Hello, Nora, how are you?" Justin drawled. "Mistletoe—now why didn't I think of that? May I borrow yours, Gordon? No use to run, Nora—" He bent and kissed her lightly on the lips. "Merry Christmas," he said gently.

"Merry Christmas yourself, Justin." Her eyes were wet. "I'm afraid we're terribly early."

"Not a bit of it. Hello, Gordon—yes, take that chair, why don't you?" For Gordon had lurched over and was sprawling in the chair next to the fire.

"C'mon, Justin, mish—missletoe gives you one kiss with Emmy, too! C'mon, give her the kine she likes! On Chris'mas ev'rybody d'serves kiss of kine they like—"

"Oh, I agree," Justin said coolly. "But with Emelie I don't care for the kind she's obliged to give." He strolled to the fire and tossed the sprig of green on the flames. "Come, Nora, sit over here where it's warm."

It was all as dull and as difficult as I had known it would be. William brought in a tray with coffee and fruit cake, and Gordon grew somewhat more sober and slightly less offensive, though not much; it seemed to me his eyes dwelt on the bodice of my gown more than good manners would dictate. Nora was frail and tired; however, I thought she seemed almost to enjoy herself as Justin put questions to her about her coming trip.

"Thass right, by Jan'ry whole town gonna be deserted," Gordon said. "Merrill too, she says. I'm s'prised she can afford it—I got the goin' price for the River House, yes, *sir!*"

Nora said, "I hear she sold a painting in that Welkin Panorama show."

"Mean lookin' son of a bitch," Gordon said around a mouthful of cake. "I happened by just as they were dolin' out the champagne."

Justin's eyes rested on him thoughtfully.

Gordon looked at Justin and sniggered. "She's still mad as a hornet I rented Tamarack to you—if I'd left well enough alone, she says, you wouldn't of been here to mess things up!"

"Her word was 'interfere'," Nora said coldly. "If she didn't want Emelie to have Tamarack, she ought not to have 'interfered' herself! After all, Gordon, your Aunt

Martha might never have left Tamarack solely to Emelie if she hadn't found out about her husband's—uh—death." She flushed. "I'm not being very tactful, I'm afraid, mentioning such unhappiness."

I said, "So it was Merrill who told Gam about Bard?"

"In a way, I did," Gordon said sullenly. "Merrill conned me into it. But she outsmarted herself! She had this clipping, see—it was in the *Horizon*—it told all about it, 'n' she said to me, 'Gordon, dear, don't you think this is something dear Martha ought to know?' " I didn't look at Justin. "'Pass it along to Dixon,' she says. 'I'm sure he'll advise her Tamarack would be just *too* much for a young widow to cope with all *alone*.'" He gave a short bark of laughter.

Some obscure urge to be honest made me say, "I wasn't a widow, Nora—I was divorced. But Gam knew—I didn't deceive her. I don't know how she knew, but she knew."

"Merrill again," Nora said wearily. "Martha said Dixon had told her something Merrill found out about you. That notice in the paper had made Merrill curious, so she'd sent off an inquiry about your husband's death, and got word back he'd left only his parents. I'm sorry—why on *earth* are we talking about all this?"

"No, I'm glad to know," I said. "I've wondered. You see, Gam resented being told. She—she loved me far more than I deserved—she was so loyal . . ."

"Somebody sure did Merrill a favor buyin' that picture." Gordon shifted his weight. "Wonder what she got for it?"

"Why don't you ask her?" Justin said dryly.

"I did. She wouldn't say. Neither would Vale. Maybe she hadn't any business sellin'?"

"Of course she did!" I said. I wished he'd keep his eyes above my neck. "She and Merrill agreed on an asking price—oh, you mean Merrill? But Gam left everything in the River House to her which the Will didn't spell out as mine!"

"Maybe the guy who *bought* it hadn't any business to," Gordon said sullenly. "Suppose it was Mansfield—there's such a thing as *collusion*, you know. As executor, Mansfield was all over that house, tellin' me to lock up this, lock up that. Once he knew Merrill was goin' to get the

residue, if you follow me, he'd be mighty careful Martha didn't get reminded about that paintin'!"

"You're assuming he knew its value?"

Gordon brightened at the sight of William bringing in a steaming bowl of rum punch. "Mansfield has always been very interested in Merrill's int'rests, know what I mean?"

"Why not? Merrill is his own dead brother's child—"

He gave a knowing laugh. "Maybe yes, maybe no."

"I wish you'd stop dredging that up," Nora said. "What earthly difference does it make now?"

Gordon drained his cup. "There's a hell of a diff'rence how a man feels about his niece, and how he feels about his daughter, right? *And* what he'll do for her."

Justin said nothing. He was like a spectator at a tennis match, I thought: his eyes first on one, then the other.

"That's nothing but gossip, Gordon, and you know it," Nora said firmly. "And after all, Donnet married Janice, Dixon didn't."

"Yeah," Gordon said, "now you've got it—Donnet married Janice, and Merrill was born seven months later—nearer six. Okay, so what? Happens all the time. But Dixon had been expectin'—hell, he'd been *countin'* on getting the judgeship, or whatever you call it—and would of, with Henry Carson's backin', but when it come to it, Henry backed down on backin' him—" he chuckled—"and Dixon Mansfield has never been *nobody's* judge."

"I can't imagine why Dixon wouldn't marry Janice, if he had reason to," I said. "Surely a seven-months child wouldn't seriously affect his career? Were people that straitlaced here?"

"Maybe he wasn't sure the child was his," Gordon said carefully. "Maybe Donnet wasn't sure either, and they tossed a coin, and Donnet won."

"Henry took it hard," Nora said. "He hated to be the target of any tongues he hadn't set to wagging himself, I gather."

There were voices in the hall. "I give her my word!" I heard Pentacost say, and the door opened, and in he came, carrying a large, lumpish package loosely wrapped in newspaper. "Here it is, Emmy, by Christmas, like I promised! Took me a mite longer'n I figgered; it's a complicated thing, ye know." He had thrust the package at me to hold—it was quite heavy—and was peeling off the

wrapper himself. "Wait'll you see—like you said, Emmy, it's what Justin wants most of all in all the world!"

The paper fell unheeded on the floor, and I stood there holding another of Pentacost's exquisite carvings. Hackmatack, I thought desperately. Epinette Rouge. Eastern Larch. *Larix laricina* . . .

The tallest of the trees was twisted as if battered by bitter winds, and its limbs drooped as if weighted by ice and snow. About it grew smaller, younger trees with that ardent, up-reaching thrust to their branches I had always heretofore found so moving. The sight moved me now with something close to panic. Dear God! it was such obvious symbolism! The young trees eagerly stretching up their branches were hungry, hungry and threatening . . .

"Bull's-eye!" Gordon said with a grin. "That's sure what Justin wants more than anything in the world! *Tamarack*—yeah, you're right on target!"

Nora struggled to her feet. "I'm tired. I want to go home," she said, her lips trembling. "Thank you, Emelie—Justin—"

There followed a few moments of safety while we saw the Fenwicks into their coats and to their car. Then we returned without a word to the parlor, where Pentacost was smirking proudly at his sculpture.

Justin strolled over to look at it more closely. "That's beautiful work, Pentacost. You're a wizard with a knife."

"It was Emmy's idea," Pentacost said modestly.

"You certainly carried out her inspiration superbly."

"What he has his heart set on," she said, Pentacost said happily. "I sure am thankful ye likes it, Justin." He looked at me and smiled shyly. "C'mon, Emmy—pay up!"

"Good God, Emelie, haven't you honored your part in this deal?" Justin said lightly.

I couldn't look at him. "But Pentacost," I stammered, "I brought your dinner, as we agreed!"

He laid his finger against his nose. "Have ye forgotten? I was hopin' fer another little peck—one o' them birdlike kisses ye gives, I said, if'n ye really liked it!"

I went over and touched my lips to his cheek. "Thank you," I said in a low voice. "It's truly lovely—I know he's pleased."

"Won't you have a glass of punch before you go?" Jus-

tin said, which was just about as pointed a hint as I'd ever heard.

Pentacost shot him a startled look, glanced uncertainly around, mumbled a refusal, and retreated into the hall. After a moment's hesitation I followed, with some idea—I suppose—of reassuring him, or trying to, but he was already gone.

Reluctantly, I went back to the parlor. Justin had picked up the sculpture and was regarding it appreciatively.

"I hadn't realized to what an extent Pentacost is a true artist. How much did you help him? It's quite a sophisticated concept to arrive at without expert coaching: the old tree dominating the site, burdened by years but beautiful even in age, and the younger trees demanding their share of space and light. What a gifted teacher you must be, to be able to convey such subtleties of thought to so simple a mind as Pentacost's!" He looked about him. "Where to display it? It's my one Christmas gift and I want to do a bit of boasting, that my wife would take so much forethought and trouble, pledging everyone to secrecy, making daily treks to supervise its progress—"

"Justin, I *swear* I never suggested *any* specific subject! And *please* don't leave it there—" for he had set it down on the painted chest and had stepped back to admire the effect—"where I have to see it! Take it into your east wing—"

"Into my refuge?" he said, as if astonished. "Now why would I want to take this—ah—superb bit of vindictiveness in there? No, I've a better idea. If you really want it out of your sight—and it does you credit, my dear, this squeamishness, belated though it may be—I'll put it in the Hogarth room. It already reeks of the corrosive passions; a dollop more won't matter."

He snatched up the sculpture and strode out.

I stood there staring at the scantily trimmed tree with its empty candleholders—a fitting symbol, I thought wretchedly, of Justin's Christmas. "A man like Justin," Pentacost had said, "who should have his sons by now . . ." Was *that* what he'd meant the carving to signify? An older tree . . . young trees springing up—dear God, it was obvious! Poor Pentacost! No wonder he'd been taken aback by Justin's reaction. In all fairness, I

would have to go and explain what it was that Pentacost had intended to convey . . . though it would be exceedingly embarrassing a concept to spell out.

I found Justin pacing like a man possessed from one to another of the portraits. The sun was streaking in from the southwest directly in my eyes; it was a moment or two before I saw the tamaracks sculpture on the empty hearth, and on the mantel above it, another Rhys—the ‘vitriol in his veins’ portrait that had been the sensation of the Gallery show.

“Dear God!” I cried. “What is *he* doing here?” Looking very much at home, I thought, and shuddered. “It’s Israel Carson, isn’t it? I wonder I didn’t know him at once!”

“The Founding Father? I assumed it was—who else could it be? I intended it for your Christmas—” he shrugged—“—but when the purchase was complete, Merrill—rather belatedly, I thought—said she hoped I was buying it for myself because you’d said you didn’t want it; Vale, appealed to, reluctantly confirmed this. No matter—I want it!” He continued his pacing. “Yes, this very winter!” and he laughed softly, exultantly. “I’ll start with the Rowdons, why not? Faces for history—Yankees Undiluted! Yes, by God! I’ll stop running away like a damned fool—like a damned fool!” He caught my astonished gaze on him and he laughed again. “There’s something liberating about genius, isn’t there? Look at this incredible sequence—” His arm swept the room. “You know you can’t equal it, but it forces you to try your very damndest! He was here in this room, of course—he walked on these very boards, your Parsloe Rhys. Seducing her, no doubt. Besieging her citadel, until she surrendered willingly—”

I could have sworn the eyes in the portrait on the mantel glittered as if they were alive.

Justin was gazing at the Emelie in lime silk, her hair blowing wantonly, her lips parted. “Oh, yes, she lowered her defenses and she yielded her holy of holies gladly—” he nodded carelessly toward Emelie Radiant—“having found his embraces far preferable to those of her—how would you describe him, your Israel Carson? Insensitive? Yes, I think we can safely say insensitive—but not passionless, don’t you agree? Those lips set like a whiplash

across his face don't mean he lacked *every* human emotion, because unless I'm very much mistaken he caught our loving pair *in flagrante delicto*, and dear God! as you would say, his choler was extreme—"

"Justin, *stop* it! What do you know of what her life was like? The isolation, the loneliness, how he treated her or ignored her? Then along came this painter, half her husband's age, I suppose, and aware of her not only as a woman but as a human being, starving for friendship, perhaps, for someone to talk to. Oh, I suppose you're right about the bare facts of what happened—" He laughed, and I colored hotly. "It's nothing to laugh about! If she took Parsloe Rhys as a lover, it was because she couldn't help herself—she loved him more than life!" I was gazing at the portraits on the inner wall, lit up now by the setting sun as if they were on a stage. "And I hope he loved her truly and deeply, because dear *God*, as *I* would say—he paid with his life, didn't he?"

"What makes you say that?"

"I . . . don't know. But artists always do, don't they? One way or another, they give their lives for their work. But he—Parsloe Rhys—" I forced myself to look at her last portrait—"he gave his life literally. *That's* what she's looking at—she sees the death of her lover!"

"And he's painting as he writhes in his death throes?" He laughed again, harshly. "Like a grand-opera tenor singing at the top of his lungs for half an hour after the baritone has run him through with a sword?"

"This room was a prison, it *smells* of it!" I cried. "There were bolts on the door—you can still feel the marks in the paint! Israel Carson bolted them both in here—"

"Alone?" he said incredulously.

I could have hit him. "She was pregnant! It must have been close to her time—"

"Oh, yes, she bore a son, didn't she? Trueblood Carson—"

We stared at each other.

"Trueblood," Justin said, entirely sobered. "What a name for a child whose paternity is in doubt!" He gave a mocking half-salute toward Israel. "Did you choose the name to stifle gossip, you old devil, or to twist the knife?"

"Both, perhaps," I said, gazing at the last Emelie.

"But to go on painting her under some kind of compulsion—some threat? Impossible, Emelie. A man can't paint with a pistol at his head, any more than he can make love."

Her eyes were pleading with me . . . speaking to me . . .

"Perhaps she knew and he didn't," I said slowly.

"You think Israel said something to her like, 'I know you've been faithless, but if he doesn't find out I know, I'll let him go'? Not he, Emelie—not that vindictive bastard! More likely it was, 'You faithless whore, as soon as he's finished with this last—as soon as I've a proper record of your sinful snares—I'm going to kill your lover, may he rot in Hell!' et cetera, et cetera. *That* would account for her expression, don't you agree?"

"She would have warned him," I said.

"To what purpose? He may have been a brawny lad, her Parsloe Rhys, but I wager he was no match for your ancestor—look at the shoulders on him!"

I glanced at Israel Carson, and then, unbelieving, at the shoulders Justin had so casually called to my attention: at the shape of the shoulder, broad, sloping, the line of the coat well-defined, the sleeve set in with that slight exaggeration . . .

"Justin, take him out of here!" I cried. "Take him to your studio or the lilacs room or wherever you like, but don't leave him in here—don't put him where I can see him!" *Though he can see me, I thought, wherever and whenever he pleases, and no locks can keep him out.* "Or where he can see *her*," I went on with a rush. "And, anyway, if he wasn't Trueblood's father, he wasn't *my* ancestor, was he? Oh—no, wait—yes he was, he was Constance's father—"

"Didn't you say Trueblood put up that stone to his mother? The one we had difficulty reading?"

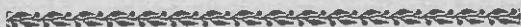
"'Whose fate my father knew,'" I quoted. "Dear God! Will we ever *know* her fate—"

"Not 'fate,'" Justin said. "'Face'—'Whose *face* my father *drew*.' He knew, Trueblood did, there was no reason he should not marry Constance—he wasn't related to her at all!"

I was tremendously relieved. It seemed to matter enormously, that Emelie Stark's son, whoever was his father,

whatever sin his mother had committed, had not himself broken this most ancient of taboos. In a way, it was the best Christmas present of all—I wasn't *twice* descended from Israel Carson; once was more than enough.

Chapter Twenty-nine



By the morning of New Year's Day it seemed safe to say January was beginning well. During the previous week Justin, with William's help, had completed the cleaning of the studio, and he reported to my vast relief that his drawings had sustained far less damage than he'd feared: only the edges of the drawing papers were smudged, and much of this could be removed by careful washing. Then, too, the house itself was at last 'coming along', as Grace kept saying with satisfaction as we thinned out the furniture clogging the various rooms. The Rowdons' apartment now blossomed with ferneries and whatnots; Mrs. Grimes graciously accepted the patent rocker and the jardinière; and Deese Ransom obliged by making off with cots, daybeds, and golden oak bureaus.

The windows, of course, were still bare of draperies, and except for a few small rag rugs, there were no carpets. Grace and Mrs. Grimes set about giving the floors a thorough waxing, and soon had them softly gleaming.

When the rooms had been arranged for comfort and use, I began to embellish them with silver and glassware from various boxes and barrels. Then on the last day of the old year, Justin and William made three forays on the Welkin greenhouse, returning each time with the Audi loaded with handsome foliage plants as well as cut flowers; and so Tamarack greeted the New Year as bedecked in finery as a bride.

I had invited Vale Whittaker to a festive midday dinner, but she had already accepted elsewhere. Dixon Mansfield, arriving promptly at one, was therefore our only guest.

He gazed about with a bright air of approval. "Well, Emelie!" he said, accepting a glass of sherry, "do you know, I don't remember ever seeing Tamarack looking so well. It's amazing what wax and polish will do, especially when someone has hacked away the undergrowth, so to speak. I used to think Henry would be well suited to running a pawn shop. I must say you've done wonders here—even that voluptuous sofa and that extravagantly conceived sideboard look—ah—tamed, one might almost say *reined in*."

"The odd thing is, I'm growing fond of them," I said.

"I daresay one does, with time. Like one's less conventional relatives, I suppose. Tell me, Justin, how is the painting going?"

I stiffened. It was a question Bard had always answered savagely, reading into it condescension if not an outright sneer. However, Justin replied amiably enough: "Well, and yet not well, Dixon. I find myself growing impatient with my botanical studies—they're too remote from the passions of us fallible humans. I have a hankering to go back to portraits, and it's all the fault of that least conventional relative of Emelie's." When Dixon looked puzzled: "I refer to the subject of that latest portrait."

"You mean Merrill's?"

"I persuaded her to sell. I have it on the wall across from my bed, where it's the first thing I lay eyes on in the morning—a harsh awakening, you must admit: Israel Carson glaring at me across the room, across the years. 'Fool,' he says to me, 'no man lives forever, and what are you doing with your eyes and your nerves and your blood while you still have them?'" Justin moved to seat me at the table.

Over the soup, Dixon looked at Justin with an odd little smile and said, "When I asked if it was Merrill's portrait to which you referred, I meant was it that one you did of her when you were first married?"

"That last one before I entered on my seven years' servitude? Pentacost says you have it now. I must say I admire her lack of sentiment. I trust she didn't put too exorbitant a price on it?"

"She gave it to me," Dixon said evenly. "She said she

wanted nothing about her which would remind her of you."

"Indeed? I hadn't realized she was capable of such delicacy of feeling."

I said hastily, "Pentacost mistook her for Janice—does Merrill so much resemble her mother, then?"

"Very much so." Dixon toyed with his glass. "It is . . . uncanny. I have the portrait, yes, but not hanging across from my bed. I haven't your—ah—nobility of character, Justin. I could not bear to awaken every day to be greeted by the illusory likeness of my elusive love, my Janice." He smiled at me ruefully. "You may have heard, Emelie, that it's a Mansfield trait to snarl the skein of family affection. Yes, I loved Janice, but I was too stodgy for her. She chose Donnet; he had more fire."

I said, "How did Israel's portrait ever wind up in the attic of the River House? It seems so obviously to belong at Tamarack."

"Well, of course it always was Martha's," Dixon said. "No doubt she took it with her when Henry—ah—ousted her. I wouldn't be surprised if she took it along as an object lesson for her nephew—your grandfather, my dear. Martha always blamed the distorted passions of the Carsons on Israel—'It's in our blood!' she would say, and perhaps she was right."

"What sort of man was he?" Justin asked idly. "From his portrait, one would say he was an uncommonly bitter man, and harsh."

Dixon sipped his wine. "Martha once told me what she knew of his history—you must remember his fourth wife was still living when Martha was a child here in Tamarack. Israel Carson had four wives but not one happy marriage. His first lasted less than a year, his bride dying in childbirth and her infant with her. For more than a decade he lived alone—a long time to grieve, in those days, a wife being a domestic necessity as well as a—ah—a comfort. In 1815 or thereabouts he married Elizabeth Pinney, who also had the misfortune to die in childbirth, but this time the child survived. Three or four years later he brought home a young Bostonian, Emelie Stark. From all reports she was a beauty—" Dixon smiled at me—"it's hard to understand why she would marry a man

twenty years older than she and twice widowed, but she did. Perhaps his wealth attracted her."

"It's quite possible that such a man as you describe—a hard and ruthless man of considerable experience—might have had a—a kind of glamor—" What I meant, of course, was that he might have a strong sex appeal, but I certainly wasn't going to say so, not in present company.

"Whatever the reason, she accepted his suit and accompanied him home to Tamarack. In the summer of 1821 she bore him a son, Trueblood, and sometime the following spring she died. Again Israel Carson embarked on a lengthy widowhood—"

"Why?" I said sharply.

"Perhaps, my dear, by now he had an unlucky reputation—"

"No, I mean why did Emelie Stark die? It was nearly a year later—it couldn't have been Trueblood's birth—"

Justin said dryly, "Perhaps there was to be another child. It seems likely; your ancestor was not one to neglect his wives."

"Martha never said; perhaps she didn't know," Dixon said. "Let's see—where was I?"

"Israel was a widower for the third time." Justin refilled my glass.

"Ah, yes. Well, from 1822 until 1836 Israel Carson lived alone at Tamarack, except for his son Trueblood and his daughter Constance; perhaps this time, in spite of his wealth, it was not easy to find a wife." He paused while William passed the wild rice. "In 1836, Israel Carson took Elizabeth Stearns to wife. She was a sturdy but undeniably plain woman who bore him five sons in the nine years of their marriage. Which brings us to 1845—" Dixon accepted orange sauce. "Israel Carson was now a mere sixty-six, scarcely ripe enough to drop dead on his son's wedding day, which indeed he did. According to Elizabeth Stearns, from the very start the day was a disaster. Not only was Trueblood marrying his half-sister—at any rate it must have appeared so to the entire town—but he was seizing the occasion to erect a memorial stone to his mother, upon which he had inscribed a verse that cast serious doubts on his own paternity. Israel reacted with violence and passion. He attempted—unsuccessfully

—to knock down the stone, no doubt in the hope of concealing the inscription from the wedding guests. Then he attempted to chisel off the offending words, but the exertion proved too much for him; he collapsed across the grave and there he died. Which, all things considered, may have been just as well, for if Trueblood's accusations were believed, the question would naturally arise, who was Trueblood's father, and where was he? And certain ugly rumors, which had had more than twenty years to die down, would have flared up again, with unpleasant consequences for Israel, murder being a crime for which there is no statute of limitations." Delicately, Dixon patted his mouth with his napkin. "There's no doubt a roving artist did come to Tamarack, because there is the portrait to prove it. I wonder Israel didn't destroy it."

"He was too cool a customer for that," Justin said. "No doubt everyone in Welkin knew Rhys had come here. What no one knew was when he left, or how. All Israel had to do was to express regret that Rhys must have perished in the winter woods."

I said slowly, "I wonder what excuse Israel gave when he covered up those portraits of Emelie—if he bothered to give any, I mean." I turned to Dixon. "Did this Elizabeth Stearns ever tell Martha?"

"Portraits?" Dixon said. "Covered up? I don't understand."

"I'm surprised they come as a surprise to you, Mansfield," Justin drawled. "Yes, there were—that is, there are—six portraits of Israel's third wife, the first Emelie, in what we call the 'Hogarth room', after that whore-in-London sequence Israel used to conceal them. The portraits are quite dazzling, though the cumulative effect is unpleasant, in my view, recording as they do her growing madness. Odd you should be unaware of them."

"It does seem strange," Dixon said slowly, "that no one knew. I can't believe Martha ever saw them—surely she would have told me. I doubt if Elizabeth Stearns did, either—Israel would have had them covered before he remarried, I should think."

It's not true no one knew, I was thinking. Someone knew. The letter writer knew. I said, "Was *that* fact, then? Emelie Stark did go mad?"

"My dear, I am afraid so. There were stories that per-

sisted until Martha's day of a madwoman locked in an upper room in Tamarack, a woman screaming all one winter, and when the screams subsided there was prolonged, persistent weeping. Some months later a child was born, after which, apparently, the woman's madness grew more intense. At any rate her husband was forced to remove the child from her chamber for its own safety, and to engage a wet nurse. Of Emelie's death the following year there can be no doubt, for the burial was conducted by the pastor of my own church in Welkin, and the fact of the burial and the location of the grave are duly inscribed in the church records. Emelie, my dear, I'm afraid you have quite a turbulent mixture in your veins!"

"So I'm beginning to think," I said painfully.

Dixon said with a gentle smile, "It's all so long ago—that should be of some comfort. Surely as a running stream purifies itself, the Carson line is sane enough now—" he chuckled—"in spite of the evidence of Henry's Will."

"Strong evidence," Justin said dryly. "One of the many traits peculiar to your family, Emelie, is that singular delight your relatives take in running each other's lives, not only in this world but 'safely', as you would say, from the next. They dearly love to clobber their heirs over the head; the contemplation of this pleasure consoles them, I haven't a doubt, on their deathbed. Even your Gam yielded to the temptation. Consider the strings she attached—strings to which you still dance, Emelie, and will, for some time to come."

"Well, yes, Gam did like to plan other people's lives," I said slowly. "But in a *good* way—"

"Contradiction in terms."

I shook my head. "I don't agree. I remember watching her play chess with my father. 'I suppose that's what it's like to be God, Charles,' she said as she moved the pieces about. 'Pushing people toward what will make them happy, and hoping they aren't too stupid to see it.'"

"Why leave so much to chance?" Justin said lightly. "Why not *make* people jump in the right direction?"

"I asked her that very thing!" I said. "'But if you're God, Gam,' I said, 'couldn't you *make* people see what's good for them?' And she said, 'No, child, that would be against the rules. Everybody has to have the chance to

ruin his own life. It's called Free Will.' " My words had conjured up Gam so vividly I felt shaken. "And my father said, 'Otherwise there'd be no glory in winning, is that it, Martha?' 'Or shame in losing,' she said." I looked directly at Justin, then—something I seldom do, for fear of being locked there, unable to look away—and I said, "That's all she was trying to do, don't you see? Steer me toward Tamarack but make me have to do at least *some* of it myself."

"I'm sure she wanted the best for you, my dear, but at the same time—" Dixon lifted his shoulders—"the power of money is about the only pleasure left to the old."

"An immoral one, as well as dangerous," Justin said. "If he weren't so obnoxious, I could even feel sorry for Gordon Fenwick. Whatever Nora's father left her is tied up in so many knots he can no longer lay his hands on a penny. I daresay it's not much fun, having to go hat in hand to his own wife, and beg. When funds are short, better that the female blame the male, than the other way round: it's healthier. In this respect, at least, my marriage—Merrill's and mine—was superior to Nora's. 'I'll not be poor,' Merrill said. 'No man can ask that of me.' And by God she wasn't."

"*She got what she wanted the second time round . . .*" I stared at my wine. Was that why he'd divorced her? Would he give up everything . . . do anything . . .

"What would you have advised?" Dixon inquired sarcastically. "That Nora's father put his money directly into Gordon's hands, in order to spare his ego?"

"Certainly not! That would be treating him like a beggar, which is not much better than treating him like a fool. My point is that a fat purse did not give her father the right to interfere between husband and wife. Whatever he wanted to give to Nora he should have given her with no strings attached; otherwise give her nothing. And my advice—had it been asked—would have been the same to your Gam, Emelie. Either leave you Tamarack outright or leave you out."

"I fail to see that Martha's Will was in any way immoral," Dixon said icily. "She had no reason to anticipate Emelie would marry you, or that the terms of her inheritance would be a bone of contention between you!"

"Good God, Dixon, you mistake my meaning entirely!

Speaking for myself, Martha's Will has been everything I could conceivably ask for! Under what other circumstances could I have hoped for a speedier acceptance of my suit?" I stared at my wine, my face burning. "No, no—if it weren't for Tamarack being left to my wife as it was, with all those—ah—romanciful stipulations devised by a lonely old woman who did indeed have her grand-niece's best interests at heart, I am sure Emelie would have put me through a courtship of more conventional length, followed by the comedy of a prolonged engagement, culminating in the usual pageant of triumph where the bridegroom is displayed to friends and relatives somewhat after the fashion of Roman emperors dragging the conquered through the capitol streets." He laughed appreciatively at his own wit. "All things considered, I am enormously grateful to Martha for her machinations. That in no way changes the fact that her exercise of money-power, whatever its morality—and I see here we must agree to differ—could be dangerous, not to herself, of course, but to Emelie. For Tam'rack—" he slurred the word, but just barely—"is surely a prize not to be relinquished lightly."

Dear God, he can't be warning Dixon! I thought irritably. Surely he doesn't think *Dixon Mansfield* concocted those disgusting letters—Dixon, who obviously didn't know anything about the portraits! It was too absurd!

Dixon was saying cordially, "I feel sure Martha would be pleased that the terms of her Will have so effectively—ah—lightened the loneliness of Emelie's widowhood—"

Oh, this was too much! I plunged into speech. "The great thing about Tamarack is—is how perfect it is!" I babbled. "I mean, it's got everything—a disinherited son, and a ghost, and a—a curse—"

Dixon raised his brows. "A ghost?"

"Oh, yes! Pentacost says Israel Carson goes down to the graveyard carrying—" I stared at Justin, and could scarcely finish—"c-carrying a candle . . ."

"And the curse?" Justin said encouragingly, as if he were coaxing a child to perform for company.

"That was Catherine's," I said, my lips stiff. "It was in one of her letters to Gam." I searched my memory. "It went something like this: 'I cursed him, Martha, you re-

member? I put a curse on him when he drove me out. "Is-may, you son of Satan," I screeched like—like the low-born wench I was, "Tamarack will never bring you joy, no, nor to your sons! Jealousy and hate will devour them, their wives will be faithless and their friends without honor, and this house and this land will never go to one who rightly bears your name!" "It was word for word, as if I *were* Catherine. I groped for my wine glass. There'd been more, but I didn't care to share it: "*Oh, it was a fine stream of curses, Martha, and I blessed the Irish tongue that gave me the flow of it. Yet as I flung my bitter words at him as if they were stones, I had the strangest feeling I wasn't the first Carson woman to shriek these curses, nor would I be the last. Did you use them, Martha, when Henry drove you out? No, I suppose not. Something cold and well-bred, I fancy . . .*"

"Well, that does make Tamarack just about perfect!" Justin said heartily. "A house is like a woman, don't you agree? If she hasn't suffered, as she grows older her lips won't be as warm or her embrace as welcoming." He shook his head as if to clear it. "I've either had too much wine, or not enough!"

Dixon nodded solemnly. "Spiritual growth must be watered with tears."

"I don't agree." My voice trembled. "Suffering can destroy you—it can destroy your faith in yourself—"

Justin glanced at me sharply, and I saw that, whatever he chose to pretend, he was entirely sober. "Dixon isn't referring to tragedies we deserve, Emelie. I suspect he means those that humble us because they are undeserved."

"That kind is bearable," I said in a low voice. "At least you can't torture yourself that *you* did it."

"The trouble with a conscience," Justin said, "is that it has no precisely defined limits. You can't see clearly where your responsibility ends and the other fellow's begins. Say you accidentally drop a heavy parcel down the stairs. If someone is standing at the bottom, and the parcel flattens him, you feel guilty—as you should. But I think you have the right to feel annoyed, too. Assuming he wasn't crippled or tied down, you could reasonably ask why the hell didn't he get out of the way?"

I met his eyes. "But what if he *was* crippled and it

didn't show and I should have known it? Wouldn't it be my fault that I didn't know?"

"My dear, that would depend on who you are," Dixon said. "Let us assume you are not a doctor or a psychiatrist, but a young and inexperienced bride—" He was gazing at Justin with unmistakable hostility.

"Surely you are being naive," Justin said with a thin smile. "There's no such thing as an inexperienced bride nowadays—it's not considered healthy."

Dull red crept up Dixon's cheeks. "I think you forget we're not alone."

Justin laughed. "Oh, come now, you don't think I shock Emelie, do you? After that intensive course in Carson history she just audited? But even so, the family mellows with time," he went on easily. "Speaking of experienced brides, one can take comfort from Henry's reaction to Janice's—how shall I call it?—'conventional predicament'? Yes, that describes it fairly, I think. Did he drive her out, like Ismay, or imprison her in her room, like Israel? No, indeed not—he found, and with all possible speed, a suitable husband for her—"

"Surely the phrase you want is '*the* suitable husband'," Dixon said. He had gone white.

"Oh yes, to be sure—'the'—yes, that's better. More precise," Justin said carelessly. He rose, and strolling around the table, pulled back my chair. "Let's move to the other room, shall we? And admire the tree."

We crossed the hall.

Dixon said with a tremor in his voice, "Henry had nothing to do with my brother's marriage to Janice except to give his consent to it, and his blessing. He did not arrange it. Nor was there any need for him to do so. I was entirely in Donnet's confidence, and I can assure you of that. Of course I am aware of the rumors that sprang up when Merrill was born—ah—thank you—" Flustered, he accepted with ill grace the brandy glass Justin was offering him.

"If I have misinterpreted the circumstances of Janice's marriage, I apologize," Justin said coolly. "In my defense permit me to cite my source: my former wife. On one occasion when we were discussing the—ah—the pros and cons of having children, Merrill said her own mother had not wanted her, and had told her so. 'She said she

wouldn't have "tied herself down to marriage" if it hadn't been for me," Merrill told me." He regarded Dixon with a faint smile. "Donnet was hardly to be envied, I should think. Particularly if he had no reason to be aware of the circumstances to which Merrill referred."

"I cannot imagine what prompted Janice to say such a thing," Dixon said coldly. "Or why, for that matter, the subject suggests itself to you for discussion!"

"To be candid, my curiosity was piqued by a remark Gordon let drop, when he and Nora were here at Christmas."

"Gordon," said Dixon flatly, "has a salacious mind. You would be well advised to give little weight to anything he says, and particularly when the matter is no concern of yours."

"That's where you're wrong, I'm afraid," Justin said evenly. "It may be idle to speculate on the paternity of my former wife, but it *does* concern me. Anything concerning Emelie concerns me."

"I fail to see how the circumstances of my brother's marriage to Janice could possibly affect Emelie in any way!"

"Perhaps not, but as I have made it my first order of business since our marriage to ensure that Emelie fulfill all those charming *if's* and *maybe's* that Martha put between her and Tamarack, naturally I ask myself if Merrill, as alternate heir, may not also have *her* devoted supporters, though not publicly acknowledged."

"Justin," said Dixon in a voice of ice, "what you are suggesting—if I take your meaning correctly, and I'm afraid I do—is nothing short of libel. I never have and I never will betray my duties as executor by putting anyone else's interests ahead of my client's—no, not even my niece's—"

"Certainly not!" Justin agreed cordially. "*Not* a niece's—gracious me, naturally not! Impossible!"

They stared at each other. The color commenced to drain from Dixon's face.

"God in heaven!" he whispered. "Is *that* what you think—is that what Donnet—is *that* why he—"

Before my horrified eyes, Dixon Mansfield crumpled forward in a dead faint.

Chapter Thirty



Now the bitter weather began. Frozen trees creaked in the wind; snow drifted across the lane, and as fast as Deese Ransom scraped it clear, the wind swept it back again. To me the sullen skies mattered little. Among my father's books were many I wanted to read; as the snow deepened, the house grew easier to heat, and I need no longer cower in my bedroom for warmth or privacy, but could sit where I pleased in any downstairs parlor and have a good light and a comfortable chair before the fire.

I had my duties, too: I was still unpacking and sorting and cleaning and restoring. I wanted the house to look as if we lived here, and so I left the seed catalogs scattered on the Chippendale desk, and I put the fat album of family photographs on the Connecticut chest. How strangely untouched (and untouchable) the women look, I thought, with their gowns encasing them stiffly like an insect's ectoderm and their hair in smooth braids or disciplined curls. Who were they? I wondered, for there was not a name inscribed anywhere; one could even be Gam, when she was young, and I wouldn't know.

Of Justin's belongings there were none to be seen, either in the west wing or in the main house; even the tamaracks sculpture was gone from the Hogarth—Emelie Stark's—room. Nor had I seen much of him since that disgraceful New Year's dinner, for he had begun at once on William's portrait and was spending most of the hours of daylight in his studio. I did not feel in any way deprived, for he was in my bad books, as I made plain: I thought his conduct inexcusable, and when he returned from taking Dixon Mansfield home to Welkin, I had frankly said so.

"To bedevil him that way! Dear God!" I had changed into work clothes and was rubbing away at a candlestick

from a collection of pewter blackened by neglect. "And under your own roof, too!"

"Not my roof, yours," he reminded me pointedly. "Which I am determined shall remain yours, Emelie, for reasons it would be futile to go into now. I felt Mansfield ought to be left in no doubt that Gordon is far from alone in his suspicions. Not that I don't find it distasteful to agree with Fenwick on anything," he added dryly.

"It was *cruel*!" I said. "Obviously it never occurred to Dixon Mansfield anyone would wonder whether Donnet was Merrill's father—least of all that Donnet himself would question it!"

"Emelie, I swear sometimes I think even you cannot be so naive. Dixon didn't faint because, in a blinding flash, it struck him Janice might have betrayed his brother Donnet, and that Donnet might have come to realize this, and—naturally—to wonder if Dixon were the—ah—the interloper. Dixon fainted—and I grant you it was a genuine faint—because he realized *others besides Donnet* were asking themselves that very same pointed and unpleasant question."

"I don't believe it!" I said. "I *like* Dixon Mansfield!"

"Of course you do." He smiled faintly. "You like all sorts of flawed and imperfect things, don't you? It is my hope that with time your tolerance may extend even to me." He picked up the candlestick and inspected it, rubbing his thumb over the base. "There's a nick here—it must have been dropped." He handed it back.

"What of it? It's very old, so it's been used—" I stared at the metal, turning it in my hands—"or abused, as you say. But why should something beautiful have to be without a blemish? Like silver without patina—it only shows it's never used."

"Or a woman," he said deliberately, "growing older without lines in her face." Startled, I looked up. "She can't, can she, unless she never feels deeply about anything. Perfection—" he shrugged—"how can it mean *unused*? Whatever is admired but never touched, never put to use, is cold, sterile, and—in my view—quite *imperfect*."

Something in his expression had set my heart to thudding painfully. But Merrill's not like that! I thought. Does

he see her as a lovely shell, nothing more? "But she—she *does* feel deeply!" I stammered. "*Very* deeply!"

"Does she indeed?" he said with an odd little smile. There was a pause. Then: "Would you care to go to bed with me, Emelie?" He was lounging against the mantel, and he spoke in much the same manner as he'd once asked me—or, rather, *not* asked me—to go to the movies. "*I don't suppose you'd care . . . ?*"

My blood had turned to ice. From head to toe I could feel it: a tidal wave of frost. "Certainly not!" I gasped.

"No, I didn't think you would," he said coolly. He did not appear in the least disappointed. "Perhaps I should explain I wasn't sure what you were driving at, with all that talk of used and unused useful things," he went on conversationally. "Plus those digs at my lamentable behavior under what you so charitably term 'my own roof'. I merely thought I'd mention it, in case you felt I was derelict in any of my other duties."

I stumbled to my feet. "Thank you, but no thanks!" I began to fold my polishing cloths. "There was *no* need to offer, I assure you! I may be critical of your treatment of Dixon Mansfield, and think it both uncalled for and—and ungentlemanly, but I have *no* criticisms of your treatment of *me*! The—uh—the relationship between us is *perfect*, in my opinion!"

"How very reassuring. I sha'n't mention it again, but for the record, I want it duly noted that I did offer. Now, before we change the subject entirely, I must caution you against expecting me to act according to any notions you have of what's proper to a gentleman. I'm no gentleman, Emelie, and you'll be less disappointed if you don't expect me to be." He straightened, picked up the candlestick again, and ran his thumb over the base; it occurred to me to wonder if he were embarrassed, and was attempting to hide it. "Careless," he said, and set it down again. Then, again with that odd little smile: "More advice, this time brotherly. You really shouldn't go about making fervent remarks about the depths of your feelings. Most men—even artists—can be expected to respond as I did; but not all, my dear, would accept a rebuff as . . . gratefully."

I gasped. "I was talking about Merrill! So were you—you know you were!"

"Were you?" he said, and laughed. "You were not—and neither was I. Look: let's agree to forget it, shall we? I made a mistake—a natural one, I think—but if I am not angry with you for saying no, why should you be angry with me for asking?"

"What ought I to be—complimented?" I said furiously.

"Why not? At least you ought not to be angry with me for *not* being angry."

And to that I could think of nothing to say.

A week or so later we went down to Boston, as he'd promised we would. We spent the better part of three days shopping for rugs and for fabrics to hang at the windows and to re-cover the upholstered pieces, shopping that was for me an unalloyed delight. I had not expected we would be in continual agreement on matters of fiber and texture and pattern, and when it came to color, I could see at once he had a far more subtle and sophisticated knowledge of its interplay than I, and I deferred willingly to his suggestions. I confess there were times when his lordly disregard of price troubled me, but I felt (wisely, I think) that to remonstrate with him in public over such a matter would be folly. Besides, I had to confess I thoroughly enjoyed not having to put considerations of cost above and before everything else.

I refused outright to shop for clothes. The slacks had come from Montreal, several pair of them, two or three with matching jackets or a vest, all with pullovers; I was wearing the 'decent' coat—'decent'! Dear God! It was pale buttery suede, with great turn-back cuffs and a collar that could be a hood and the lining all in some sleek brown fur like moleskin. I declared I needed nothing more. He said I did, I needed good stout boots for hiking the hills of Tamarack and also some warm footwear for the house; even with rugs the floors would still be cold.

For these we went to Dillman's, and it gave me a very odd feeling to sail in past the great bronze doors and the lemon trees in tubs, now moved in out of the cold. None of the staff seemed to recognize me, and I did not think, somehow, that Justin would like me to make some kind of ya-ha-ha-look-at-me-now processional of it, and so I pretended to be just another aloof Dillman customer as he took an inordinate amount of trouble over the fit of the

sleek warm boots to wear with my beautiful slacks: one would think I was a child, and helpless. But of hiking boots they had none.

That first evening we dined early in order to attend a concert at Symphony Hall. I was not yet sure of the purpose behind his compliments, at which I blushed helplessly over dinner, or of his charming attentiveness during the intervals, and I became excessively shy and more than a little apprehensive that his conduct in public—*see the young St. Johns, a charming couple, so devoted*—was not merely an act to protect his pride. As soon as we were alone in our rooms, his reversion to our usual relationship—bare civility—reassured me: apparently not trusting me to be able to assume on cue the role of happy bride, he had conceived the notion we should practice our parts out of the limelight as well as in.

The second evening we dined with his lawyers at the junior partner's house in Brookline. As our taxi lurched over the patchwork of streets, I mulled over the wording of our marriage contract and was seized by an agony of anticipatory embarrassment. However, not by so much as a flicker of an eyelid did anyone betray he had reason to suspect our marriage was other than conventionally happy. (It was possible, of course, that Justin's conduct, and mine, gave rise to the conviction that propinquity had had its traditional effect.)

The afternoon of the third day we were to drop in for a drink with two of Justin's friends from art school—Joe and Sydney, no last names—and then make an early start for home. All might have gone according to schedule except that as we reached my old rooming house (my "ethnic origins," Justin called it) the four-year-old assassin, looking strangely bloated in a snowsuit several sizes too large, had dodged from behind the shiny green trash sacks (surely not the same ones?) and gone racing up the steps shouting, "Ma! Ma! It's the robber lady!"

So it was I found that my suitcase, that battered canvas satchel that I never expected to see again, had turned up in one of those dubious second-hand furniture stores on Washington Street, where there had been some kind of fracas—a knifing in connection with a holdup, Mrs. Blaikson said with relish—and that cop with the sandy hair had spotted it. "On account of your picture that was

left in it," she said. "So he took it along to the station house. Wouldn't let *me* sign for it," she added venomously, and shot Justin another I-know-your-kind look.

I signed for my satchel at the police station, and as soon as we were outside again, I zipped it open, to find it empty except for some fragments of plaster and two sketches Bard had done of me, one in sepia wash—very pale and far away I looked—and the other the one with apple-green hair.

"Of everything they stole," I said, "what I'd like back most of all—after my parents' picture, I mean—would be Sam's footprint."

Justin was looking at the sketches as an archeologist might examine an artifact from an alien culture. "Who was Sam?"

"My cat." I glanced about. "Where's a 'Keep Boston Blooming' bin? There's nothing here worth saving."

"Except these." He still held the sketches, gazing from them to me as impersonally as if I, too, were an exhibit.

"Those, too—I don't want them!" I couldn't imagine why I'd saved them, why I'd dragged them with me to Boston. "I don't want to be *reminded!*"

"Respect my qualms about destroying an artist's work," he said evenly. "You can't just toss them into a trash can—damn it, that's a form of murder! If you're sure you don't want them, mail them to his parents at least. Don't you have their address?"

I knew they wouldn't want them either, feeling as they did about me, but Justin was not to be dissuaded. We disposed of the satchel and caught a cab without difficulty, but after that everything slowed as if congealing with cold: settling our bill, wrapping the sketches for mailing, raising the Audi from subterranean storage, and finally threading our way through that mass insanity that is Boston traffic. It was already six-thirty; we'd planned to be well north of the city by now.

Joe and Sydney lived in one-room-plus on a narrow street off Harvard Square. Joe (male) and Sydney (female) were thirtyish, unmarried, and rather more than moderately talented, judging by the three-dimensional abstracts tacked up on the walls. They said, "Hi, Emelie!" as if they'd known me for years; said, "Will you have

your bourbon with or without water?"; said, "Okay, where did you find her?"

I sipped my drink and sat back against the wall, listening to them talk and laugh about events and people I had never heard of, and I didn't feel in the least left out; it was as if I belonged to their world but for the moment wasn't feeling talkative.

"Sorry about no ice," Joe said, refilling our glasses. "The fridge won't freeze water, it's choosy."

Sydney said, "It chooses to freeze the lettuce, the oranges, the eggs . . ."

After a bit our glasses were replenished again. And possibly again. Joe stretched a long arm to the bookshelf, started flipping pages. "I quote from the Book of Trees," he said in a tone of heavy significance. "Tam, tam, rack rack rack—oh, here we are." He raised his eyebrows. "God, Emelie, if you were a European you'd be a larch!"

"Oh, what you said!" Sydney leaned to read over his shoulder: "'In winter has a forlorn look like a dead spruce.' Oh, what vile calumny is this!" She passed the book to Justin.

"'Tolerant of acid soils and some adversity, but not for too long.' True of anybody. 'Shallow rooted, and can be blown over by strong winds. The heart—' good God!—'the heart can be gnawed by porcupines, and prolonged flooding is fatal—' "

"'Best age is seventy-five years,' " Joe interrupted him. "Hell, I'd argue *that*. 'Good seed crop at intervals of three to six years.' Hmm. 'S long as you don't keep it up indefinitely—"

"My turn," said Sydney. "'Associates—' heavens, Emelie, this reads like a Congressional investigation!—'associates: creeping snowberry, red osier dogwood—' *Red osier!* E. Tamarack St. John, do you take the Fifth?"

"She can't have the whole thing, dammit," Joe said, and carefully poured the remaining drops evenly glass by glass.

It was absurdly lighthearted and silly, and I was touched and happy. It occurred to me it had been a long, long time since I had laughed like this, at nothing, at charming idiocies.

"'Associates,' " Sydney persisted, "'shining willow, alias *Salix lucida*—"

"Not ol' Salix?" Joe cried, and snatched the book. "In early stages the d'veloping *pis-tillate* flowers are 'tractive pink 'n' reddish outgrowths—'" He gave a low wolf whistle. "Wow! Sexy, huh?"

"If you ask me, it's time we ate," Sydney remarked lazily. "We're supposed to be making pizzas this very minute—everybody's bringing whatever they've got, it's called 'pooled pizza'."

Joe said, "Ev'rybody happy to say hello to Emelie—hell of 'n improvement over Merrill. Sits there like princess unner a spell, smilin' 'n' sayin' nothin', lookin' at you, you lucky dog, 's if she can't b'lieve her luck. Syd, you look at me like that, we'll get married—"

"We will *not*. Nobody's going to get *me* to lock the door—any minute I can walk out, and you know it! Boy oh boy does that improve your manners!"

Justin laughed. "Sorry, we really must go—we've got a four-hour drive ahead."

"No need kill yourself mushin' into frozen north—we got lotsa room." Joe waved his hand. "Got spare sleepin' bag big enough for two—not to worry, Syd 'n' I very heavy sleepers—"

"Joe," Sydney said, "for God's sake Justin does *not* want to sleep on our floor."

"Put him up plenty times before, never complained—"

"Justin does not want *Emelie* on the floor."

Joe looked at me and smiled. He had a remarkably sweet smile, and I hoped he would soon sell enough of his assemblages to afford having the refrigerator fixed. "I bet she wouldn't mind. Good ol' Emelie. Loves good ol' Justin. 'Bout time, dammit. Time he cut free from goddam goldiggers. Jesus, how I hated that goddam Merrill—"

"Come on," Sydney said, tugging at his arm, and we all made our way down the narrow ill-lit stairs to the street.

There was a traffic ticket under the Audi's windshield wiper; we appeared to be parked in an unmarked no-parking spot.

"How much?" said Sydney anxiously.

"Ten dollars," Justin said, and whistled.

"Ten dollars!" Joe grabbed the ticket and angrily ripped it to shreds. "*Cornus amonium! Vibernum cas-sinoides!* You got Vermont plates, forget it! *Salix lucida!*"

"They'll be after you, Joe. That ticket's got your address on it—" and Justin took a bill from his wallet and tried to get Joe to take it. Joe refused, on the grounds that the State of Massachusetts had no reason to suspect he existed. Justin tucked the bill into Sydney's purse, with the urgent request that she not allow Joe to go to jail for his sake, and Sydney pulled his head down to hers and kissed him. "Thanks, gorgeous," she said.

"Can't we give you two a lift?"

"Not to worry, jus' round corner. So long, Em'lie darlin'—" and Joe leaned over and planted a kiss on my forehead.

Everybody wants to kiss me but my own husband, I thought as we drove off. "I hope the pizzas are plentiful," I said.

"Good God, I had no idea—I didn't know *what* to do. I wanted to go out and get a sack of stuff to eat—"

"They'd have been insulted," I said. My stomach complained audibly it, too, was empty, and I hugged my ribs to quiet it.

He was cutting in on Interstate 93 and it was tricky.

"We'll go off at Concord and get something to eat."

"I hope I last," I said. My head was swimming.

"Concord, Mass'," he said with a grin.

He was silent over dinner. The act was over: no bright chatter, no witty comments, no sly compliments. Except one, unfortunately sincere: "My congratulations on a completely convincing performance. Joe and Sydney could testify under oath that we're most happily married."

"Under *oath*? And here I thought it was your pride at stake—that you didn't want your friends to know!"

"Know what?" he said. "I've done nothing I'm ashamed of."

"How fortunate you are, Justin," I said, and sipped my coffee.

We were halfway to Concord (New Hampshire) and my head was steady as a rock and the moonlight on the Merrimack sharp-cut as a steel etching when he said, "I'd never paint you like that. I don't see you that way at all."

"Like what?"

"Remote, like a moon goddess. Beyond a man's reach. I don't think I could paint a woman who affected me that way, not if she was my wife, certainly. I mean the sepia

wash, not that obscenity with the green hair." A tenth of a mile. "He could have been a good painter one day, if he had learned to look out instead of in. In on himself all the time, I mean. Gnawing his heart out."

I had to get him off the subject of Bard. "How do you see me, then?"

"Warm, passionate, but cursed by your Puritan blood into bottling it all up. Double-sealed like a sparkling wine with a tamped-down cork and a wire clamp. Though perhaps I'd better watch how I develop this figure of speech." His teeth gleamed in a smile.

Because I was suddenly awash with the most agonizing shyness, I said with a laugh, "Fizz all over the place that soon goes flat." And could have bitten my tongue out.

We were well along on 89 and the moon so bright I fancied I could discern colors, blues in the shadows and cream where the snow quilted the clean slopes, when he spoke again: "That's the Wolf Moon."

I stared out at the frozen world and I thought of the little side roads buried in snow, all the isolated houses and the children stuffed into too-big snowsuits and the women . . . the lonely women still believing (some of them) in the Christ Child, the women like Sydney believing, believing no matter what, in men like Joe, and the invisible women (why I thought of her then I could not imagine) like Deese Ransom's wife, whom nobody ever saw, but there was that string of children, patient-eyed as his oxen but not as well fed.

CONTOOCOOK NEXT RIGHT

I said, "Where did you get your talent, Justin? Was your father a painter, or your mother, perhaps?"

In all the circle of hills that lay beneath the moon, there was not a light, not one pin-prick of light showing. We could be the first white men to cross these mountains . . .

"My father, Emelie, made his living, such as it was, cutting down other men's trees, sometimes on commission, sometimes for day wages, and sometimes on the sly. My mother may have been a disappointment to him, I don't know. She bore him only one son, though she tried—God knows she tried. She had three miscarriages that I was aware of, and there may have been more—they'd been married six years before I was born. If she had any talent

I never knew of it. Perhaps she did—perhaps it was still-born, or drowned in the blood of her misbreedings.”

His hands were easy on the wheel: rested just as easy.

“Were you an only child, too, then?”

“Hardly! I had five sisters, all younger than I. No doubt there would have been more, but my father was careless, one night, about the direction he was dropping a tree, or perhaps the wind shifted, or he had had a bit too much wine—whatever the reason, he was beneath the tree when it fell. Black walnut it was—valuable and already getting scarce.”

It seemed an odd detail for a neighbor to tell a bereaved child, and I said as much.

“My mother sent me to look for him, when it was daylight.” Another tenth of a mile. “She was seven months along with what would have been my sixth sister, but the child came and didn’t live. Just as well, everybody said . . . Perhaps they were right.”

The road curved; the moon swerved round. (GEORGES MILLS NEXT RIGHT) His face was as calm as the moonlight, and as cold. I knew that look: it was a mask I myself had worn, after Bard.

“Was it the shock? Her—her grief, perhaps?”

“I doubt it. She wept, of course, but I’ve wondered since if her tears weren’t as much relief as anything else. Her nights would be her own, now, her body her own; what strength she had left would be for herself, and for the brats she already had, and no more. Do I shock you, Emelie Carson Green-Hair-Milne Champagne-on-Ice St. John? No pretty sentimental picture of loving mother gathering her fatherless brood to her and saying, ‘We must all stick together, come what may . . .?’”

“Well, *did* you?”

“After a fashion. Celeste—she was fifteen months—died of the whooping cough that winter. Ernestine was four when she caught the measles, God knows how, she never went anywhere. She recovered, but it left her weak, and the fever carried her off the next winter—pneumonia, probably; the doctor didn’t say what it was, perhaps he didn’t think it mattered. By the time we got her to the clinic she was dead, in any case.”

He loved Ernestine, I thought. Four years old . . . dear God.

Ahead of us the sky had a dull glow, like a fever. Lebanon, I supposed, and White River Junction. In an hour we'd be home.

"How did your mother manage?"

"Oh, she was rich now. She had Social Security. One time when my father was working legitimately for some outfit that followed the rules, he'd been covered, though briefly. Whatever the payments were, and they couldn't have been large, they were more than she was used to, and they were regular. It all helped to console her, no doubt."

"How old were you then?"

"When my father died? Ten or eleven." He thought back. "Eleven plus a couple of months."

Four little children eleven and younger . . . dear God.

"Did you own your own home?"

He laughed. "As it happened, we did, but not the land on which it stood. So when the road was going to slice off the back wall, there wasn't anything coming in in damages, naturally."

"How could you own the house and not the land?"

"Emelie," Justin said with mock patience, "we were squatters—we had no right to build there in the first place. And the house was nothing much—not worth saving. Unorthodox structure, you architects would say. My father was an ingenious man. He brought home old oil cans, and flattened them, and made the roof. The sides were scrap lumber—the outside slabs of logs scrounged from the discard pile at the sawmill. I said we were poor, Emelie—what did you think I meant? That we were a one-car family and never took more than a two-weeks' vacation?"

My mother carried firewood . . . my mother never had a warm coat . . . "Is your mother dead, Justin?"

"She died of cancer when I was twenty, before I had earned any money, or at any rate enough to care for her properly. I had made up my mind, you see, when I was still very young—I suppose it was after they had to take up a collection in order to bury my father, they put a jar on the counter at the store, and a sign, *To bury Pierre Saint Jean*; I never knew who resurrected that old spelling—I made up my mind I would make money, lots of it. I would have it for a weapon. And I would have everything that goes with it. Well, I didn't know what went with

it," he said quietly. "I thought once I had money, everything would be quite simple. It wasn't. It isn't . . . is it, Emelie?"

"It's not so bad," I said lightly. "I needn't cope any longer with the Mrs. Blaiksons of this world. I don't have to gulp my breakfast and run, and the whole day is mine, not just the fringes."

We were crossing the Connecticut; in the moonlight the open water was a black ribbon between dykes of ice.

"Time," Justin said. "Yes, that's the one real luxury money can buy—time to do what you want to do. That, at least, was a promise that didn't prove false. I made my money and I have time to paint. *Jour de fête*," he ended bitterly.

The lights of habitation fell away behind us and the stars danced above the skyline. Here and there on the blanched hillsides there gleamed an isolated farmhouse; now and then lights clustered at a crossroads. In half an hour or so—less than that—we'd be turning off at one such: WELKIN NEXT RIGHT the sign would read, and ten minutes over the first ridge would bring us in, and we would slip through quietly on empty streets. Then south on the Ransom Hill road, up and over the east ridge, and we'd be home. And everything would be back to normal; the house would cast its spell and Justin and I would circle each other as warily as two dogs after a single bone. Wherein lay the fault? We'd been happy enough in Boston. Why couldn't we be like that at Tamarack?

The moon shone on his hands resting so lightly on the wheel; it played over his face—the imperious nose, the high cheekbones, the brows like hawk wings—and I wondered if Marie Gaultier dying of cancer when her son was twenty had marveled at him as I was marveling now. Or was he still callow and gawky and silent not from reserve but timidity? Where did he get it, then—his elegance (I could think of no other word for it)? His plain decent table manners . . . the way he spoke to William: courtly. The way he walked across the hall at Tamarack, with that unconscious grace, that air of possession. Raised in a shanty thrown together out of scrap lumber? I had to believe it, because he had said it was true; it was unbelievable, nonetheless. (The human race was unbelievable, when it came to that.)

"To answer your question," Justin said abruptly, "I haven't any idea where I 'got' what you call my talent—do I have to have 'got' it from somewhere? Does it really matter? What matters, Emelie, isn't so much where we get what we have, but what we do with it." And then he laughed. "My God, that's a speech worthy of your Puritan preachers at their most pompous. And snobbish as hell! Why—" mockingly—"how can a painter, or a writer, or a scientist or mathematician, come out of a tarpaper shack? Got to be some *good* blood in there somehow! *Merde*, say I! Who knows what my father would have done, or my mother either, if they'd had any schooling? Nature is notoriously wasteful, and that goes for humans as well as mayflies."

True, I thought. Bard, and Gam's Luke, and all those babies dead before sundown. Emelie Carson herself, dead at twenty-three. And Parsloe Rhys, if he *was* murdered. But he at least had done something with what he had. A painting in the National Gallery, and in Boston Fine Arts, and in Portsmouth—that's a not inconsiderable achievement. Plus his portrait of Israel, and of Emelie. Emelie six times, poor Rhys! Love her? Of course he had loved her! Yes, and poor Bard . . . *Obscenity with green hair* . . .

"You're very quiet, Emelie."

"Oh! I—uh—I was w-wondering where you—where you got your money." Well, that was true enough—I *had* been wondering. It was just that it sounded so horrible, put into words.

"I won it gambling. Does that curdle your Puritan blood?" It did, and he knew it. "In the stock market," he added lightly. "Are you reassured? I was just starting out painting. I'd had a very minor success which brought me a few commissions, nothing very large. Not enough to finance a marriage to Merrill Mansfield, God knows. So I gambled, and I won."

"I never knew anybody before who made money in the stock market," I said. "I thought that's where everybody loses it."

"Anybody could, then. I told you, it was a matter of timing. But you had to pay attention, of course. Pay court. You can't neglect her, you know, or take her for granted—she'll punish you if you do."

I must be getting sleepy. "Who will?" I said.

"Lady Luck. Courtesy title." A flash of teeth in a grin. "She's thoroughly female, unfortunately, and inclined to be jealous. I've often thought if I had been seeking money to buy the love of a woman less shallow and greedy than Merrill, perhaps the fickle lady would not have favored me at all."

I said scornfully, "Money can't buy love, Justin—that's nonsense!"

"God, what a lot you have to learn," he said.

There were no lights at Ransom's Bridge, the scattered houses asleep and silent. Then the hill road, the moonlight dodging between the trees like stage lighting. Over the ridge and onto our lane: stone walls only hinted at now, orchard asleep in snow. Then the curving drive, and a drift across it like a breastwork. And Tamarack, dark and silent, bathed in cold and silent light.

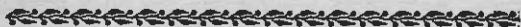
He was staring at the sleeping house as if it held him in thrall. "*A prize not to be relinquished lightly . . .*"

"Well, *did* it? Did your money buy Merrill's love?"

"Every jot and iota," he said savagely. "The last half-teaspoonful. Every crumb."

We left the car where it was and waded through the drift to the door.

Chapter Thirty-one



On the Tuesday of the last week in January I awoke to the sound of water dripping from the eaves. By breakfast time the rain had stopped, but the clouds still obscured the hills, and a mist trailed across the lake to drift lazily up the slope.

"It's uncanny how it looks like smoke," I said to William.

He set the plate of cornbread on the table. "Shall I close the curtains, Mrs. St. John? It's a dreary sight, the thaw."

"Leave them open, thank you. I can see the tips of the birches from here, and I swear they have a rosy tint. Perhaps I'm not daft, after all, planning for spring."

I unscrewed my pen, opened the garden catalog, and, thus armored against the gloom without, I commenced to 'finalize' my list.

"Will Mr. St. John be down soon, madam?" William kept up a flattering pretense that I knew what Mr. St. John would do, and when.

"Hasn't he had breakfast?" I looked at Justin's place. It wasn't touched. I started to rise, then sank back, hesitating. "William, why don't you take up a pot of coffee?"

"I'll just ask Grace to put the fire to it," William said.

I could hear laughter as the kitchen door opened and closed, and after a moment Justin came in, clearly in the best of health, but barefoot and dripping wet.

"Sorry I'm late," he said cheerfully. "I have to change—you could wring me out for rainwater!"

Indeed, he was as soaked as the proverbial drowned rat. His hair was in points like a swimmer just surfacing from a dive; his shirt clung to his body and his trousers squished as he walked.

In ten minutes he was back, dry, and (I hoped) warm.

"Ah, coffee! Eggs, ham, johnny cake—Heaven, I feel sure, holds no more for me than this!" And for a few minutes there was silence, while he ate greedily. He saw I was watching, and said, "Don't you think a little wifely solicitude is called for? Or at the very least a few petulant queries why I'm so late and how I got so wet?"

I said, "Obviously you were out in the rain."

"Nonsense, the rain—I was in the lake!" He threw back his head and laughed. "Wallowing in the water like a bull moose! Sorry you missed it, but a repeat performance will *not* take place, I assure you!"

"What on earth is so funny? You might have drowned!"

"Not where I fell in. Too shallow." He picked up his cup, but had to set it down again; he was laughing so heartily he had to wipe his eyes.

I said crossly, "I'd like to know what makes it so hilarious!"

"It seemed a good night for hunting, or hunting the hunters, to be precise. I thought they'd figure it wasn't the weather for nosy folk to be larkin' around, as Pentacost

says. Twice this past week he's come across the remains of a deer, and they weren't brought down by dogs, though dogs had taken the leavings. Well, I saw absolutely nothing, not even the inlet to the lake. I knew I was near it, of course, but I must have been careless, or sleepy—it was getting light by then, but the mist was like a feather quilt—anyway, what I thought was a gust of rain was water running under the ice. In another moment I was launched." Laughing, he helped himself to another slice of ham. Then: "What's the matter? You've got that look again. Ghosts walking?"

"If you'd drowned, no one would know what had become of you." I crumbled my bread. "You would have just vanished . . . I used to have nightmares like that in Boston—that I would disappear, I mean."

"What would you disappear into?" he said reasonably. "The pond in the Public Gardens? It's about two feet deep."

"I don't *know* where. I'd just vanish, and nobody would notice . . ." I shivered. "The rain would have erased *your* tracks entirely!"

"Don't sit there trembling over something that didn't happen—it's neurotic. Pass me the butter, please. Instant headlines, that's your trouble. Though I must admit—" he buttered his cornbread thoughtfully—"that as my feet hit the muck on the bottom, I thought, who knows, maybe I'm about to say *bon jour* to the bones of Parsloe Rhys." He chewed, swallowed. "It's as likely a demise for him as the more lurid one we dreamed up. What a shame—he and I could have spent a millennium or two discussing technique. What are you ordering?"

"Oh—uh—f-flowers for the cutting garden. I haven't anywhere near spent January's household allowance, so I assumed—it just occurred to me I should have asked."

He said something under his breath. Then, with exaggerated patience: "What flowers are you ordering?"

"Like those Gam had, mostly. Though the peonies won't blossom this year, of course—they hate being moved."

"One could safely trust you with state secrets," he said dryly. "Japanese singles, Chinese doubles, Tibetan tree?"

"I don't know—well, doubles, I suppose. Gam's favorite, *Festiva Maxima*, certainly doesn't sound Chinese. It's

the one with white petals streaked toward the center with red. I set out a dozen *Thalia* close to the terrace wall—you know, those *Triandrus narcissus*, white, with three on a stem? And then there's the York and Lancaster rose—it's very hardy, and intensely fragrant, and Gam did love it so!"

"York and Lancaster—it comes in white and red?"

"In one blossom. The petals are kind of mixed."

He stirred sugar. "You see, Emelie? You do like things flawed. Blood at the heart of the peony's purity. An aberration of a daffodil, several on one stem. Wrong, all wrong! A daffodil should never have more than one—how else can it dance in the wind, which is what it was created to do? And roses—the soul of the rose lies not only in its scent but in the subtlety of its coloring: shades of sulphur or mauve, or ivory, or crimson. Red and white streaks? A costume for a clown—"

"Dear God!" I said. "How absolutely—oh! I never heard anything so prejudiced! Listen—just for once stop talking and listen to somebody else! Where—oh, here it is: 'The York and Lancaster is a variety of *Rosa Damascena*, the Damask Rose, mentioned by Virgil a half century before Christ. It was brought back to Europe by the Crusaders, and reached England during the sixteenth century—'"

"A rose, Emelie, is not a history lesson. Nor ought a peony to put you in mind of an assassination."

So he was making fun of me! "Well, you see, Justin," I said, "I don't think of flowers the way you do. I don't know anything about their botanical position—you know, where they hook into the chain of life—" for he was looking puzzled. "Genus, order, division, species—all that. To me they are friends, and those that I've known the longest, or met when I was happy—well, they mean the most to me—"

My throat closed. Instead of warm, dry, and finishing a good breakfast, right this very minute he could be dead—dead—caught in the weeds in the black waters, like some monstrous fish turning slowly, drifting in the black silence under the ice . . .

"I wish," he said, moving to the door to open it for me, "you could extend your tolerance for flawed things and

flawed flowers to people, who are almost always imperfect, too."

Reflecting on this conversation later, I found in it one crumb of comfort: Justin had exchanged word recently with Pentacost, whom I had not seen since Christmas, and therefore it followed that Pentacost was well. I had worried during the bitter weather. He could be ill for days, and no one would know . . . Or struck by a stray bullet. How had the deer been brought down, by bullet or arrow? Pentacost had known it hadn't been dogs; maybe he'd heard the shot, or found the arrow. Strange anyone could be shooting in our woods and we wouldn't hear . . . perhaps the wind had been in the wrong direction. But the house was very silent, at night especially. As a matter of fact . . .

It came to me then that it had been a long time—weeks, actually—since I had heard the child cry. When had I last? I tried to remember . . . not this month. Not since New Year's—*not since New Year's, when Justin had so brutally warned Dixon*. As if his fainting spell had laid the ghost . . . Oh, that was ridiculous! Next I'd be claiming my trip to Boston had quieted the child! Which it might well have done, I thought, if I *had* been imagining it.

By noon the weather cleared, though the temperature hovered just above freezing. The snow had visibly receded, but was still deep, and heavy, and wet, Justin said, no good for snowshoeing and hell to wade through, having soaked up water like a sponge. He was cross and restive, tired, no doubt, from being up most of the night, but too stubborn to take a nap, and not in the mood for work.

"How's the painting going?" I said at last, in sheer perversity; he was getting on my nerves, too.

"I've finished William. Grace is next, but she's baking bread today. She hopes she can 'work me in' tomorrow."

He didn't offer to show me William's portrait, and I didn't ask.

In the late afternoon the mercury dropped suddenly and whatever moisture clung to the trees turned to ice; the snow looked like hammered silver in the afterglow. It

was beautiful beyond belief; no brush, no camera could capture it.

At dinner Justin offered me a copy of Gertrude Jekyll's *On Gardening*. "I came across it in Welkin," he said. "Have you read her at all? She has some biting things to say about artificiality I thought you'd appreciate. I always like to find an acknowledged authority in a field agreeing with me, don't you?"

I thanked him for his thoughtfulness and opened the book. On the flyleaf he had written, *To Emelie*, and beneath that, *J*.

"I didn't know you meant for me to keep it!" I stammered. "I thought—don't you collect books on gardening?"

"I have hers. That's a compilation from them." He opened his book and commenced to read.

"Well—thank you . . . What are you reading?"

"The *Aeneid*." He did not look up.

"Gracious! I'm impressed!"

"Oh? You think it presumptuous of me to read Virgil?"

"Of course not!" I flushed. "I never have, that's all."

"A friend of mine gave me his reading list from college. He told me if I read these I'd have a damn fine university education. I'll let you know when I've finished and you can tell me if you think he's right."

I retreated to *On Gardening*. After a few minutes I said, "You're right, we think alike. She says to take a small stool and sit down and look—really *look* close up—at a flower. Twenty minutes is none too long, she says."

"If I come across where Virgil mentions *Rosa Damascena* I'll let you know," he said.

I was silent the rest of the meal.

We had fallen into the custom of carrying our second cup of coffee with us in our divergent directions after dinner. I always chose to sit in the parlor across the hall; Justin preferred the adjoining room to the north, which now held my father's books. This evening, however, he followed me into the south parlor, to stand by the window, sipping his coffee and staring out at the dark.

"There's a wind coming up," he said. "God, how I hate ice storms—it slaughters the trees." I said nothing; the picture he conjured up with those few words horrified

me. "One good thing—that crust is too thin to hold a man. The deer should pass a peaceful night."

"I hope so," I said faintly.

He turned and looked at me. "This room becomes you, Emelie. It already has charm, and promises elegance. One waits to see if, when finished, it will be warm and welcoming as well." He set his cup on the painted chest. "But I keep you from your book."

When I went up to bed, lamplight streamed into the hall past the library door; Justin must still be reading. Beyond the terrace the pear tree creaked in the wind; I peered out the window at the top of the stairs, but it was too dark to see if any branches were broken. There was a light flickering beyond the lake and for a moment I thought it was a star. No: it was on the hill to the south-east—someone was out there with a flashlight or a lantern, and the branches of the trees moving in the wind gave it a starlike twinkle. The poacher, I thought. Well, I wasn't going to tell Justin; I'd had enough of his prickly humor for one day. Why didn't he have enough sense to go to bed, tired as he must be, ducked into the lake and wading back up the slope with his clothes freezing to him . . .

I undressed in my bathroom, snug and cozy with its porcelain stove; then I wrapped the velvet robe around me and scooted across to open one window a few inches. The bedroom was icy and I was in a hurry and at first refused to believe there really were all those lights out there. I stared across at the hillside. There must be six of them—no, seven. What were they doing? Brazenly driving the deer? Damn. I would have to tell Justin.

I relit my candle and looked at my watch: quarter to eleven. As I went to shut the window again I heard the sound of a car. It leaped to my mind it was William coming back, that Grace must be ill. I snatched up my candle and ran down the curving stair. The lights sweeping toward the drive were coming from Ransom's Bridge road to the west.

"Justin?" I pushed open the door. His book had fallen to the floor. The car's lights flashed across the mantel. "Justin?" I said, and touched his shoulder.

He was awake at once, staring up at me in momentary disbelief. Something leaped in his eyes—my candleflame,

I thought, and put up my hand to shade it. "There's somebody here," I said.

And then the knock on the door.

Justin took my candle and went into the hall. I could hear men's voices: "There's a child lost!" He slid back the bolt and opened the door wide.

They were asking every landowner to go over his own land. A four-year-old girl, Clemmy, Deese Ransom's Clemmy, had been missing since just before dark and they'd lost her trail on the crust; she didn't break through, the searchers did, and now there wasn't anything even her dad's hound dogs could follow. They didn't think she could have got this far, but still . . . Headquarters for the searchers was Deese Ransom's; any news, phone it there.

A four-year-old girl. That must be the one who waved at me, I thought, and my insides turned over.

"We haven't a phone," Justin said. "I'll bring her down. If anyone else finds her, would you let my wife know? I'll be checking back here from time to time."

He shut the door after them and told me curtly there wasn't a thing I could do, I might as well go back to bed. He then went and changed into his woodsman's clothes and taking a flashlight went down the lane toward the barn. Soon the Landrover came back, and Justin, Grace, and William went on into the kitchen; I joined them there. Grace was folding a blanket from the cupboard.

William appealed to me. "Mrs. St. John, I'm as able as the next man to go searching for a child."

I looked at Justin. "All right, if you stick to the road," he said reluctantly. "That crust'd kill a man over fifty." The two men went out, William with the blanket and Justin with a thermos of hot sweetened milk. "God grant they need them both," Grace said.

I went up and got dressed. When I came down Grace had the stove going and was busy mixing biscuits. "You get the coffee started and fix a big pot of cocoa," she said. "Looks like the searchers are workin' over this way."

From then until about three in the morning we kept a kind of macabre open house. Five or six search parties came by, tired men with grim faces and bleak eyes, grateful for the food and warmth, but anxious to get back out. The wind had died but the temperature was still drop-

ping. Grace sent food with each party as they left, for their own consumption and for anyone they met. The searchers had fanned out in every direction; trouble was, nobody saw Clemmy leave so they weren't sure which way she went. Her ma was in bed with the latest baby and her older sisters had been teasing her and she'd said she was going to go tell her dad. And that was the last anybody saw of her.

"And may ever," Grace said, as the men left. "Poor little tyke. Well, it's a merciful death—just go off to sleep."

"She'd be frightened first," I said. "A child that age ought to be sung to sleep."

Grace shot me a speculative look, quickly veiled.

The next men we fed were Justin and William. They'd come back because Justin's flashlight had given out. William was gray about the mouth, and I was thankful when Justin told him he was not to go out again. William did not argue. "The driving was enough for me," he admitted. "How you could keep it up, back and forth, back and forth in those damned drifts that way!"

"You both might as well go to bed," Justin told them. "You, too, Emelie. If she's not found by daylight you'll be needed at Ransoms'. Do as I tell you."

William looked stubborn; the rum toddy was reviving him. "And you, sir?"

"I'm going down to the lake. The ice would hold her, but there's that inlet." He didn't look at me.

"She'd not have got so far, surely," William said.

"No point in looking where everybody else has looked," Justin said. He struck a match and lit his lantern.

I watched from my darkened window as he crossed the terrace and started down the slope, plunging and lurching straight down, for there was no knowing where the paths were, nor the going any easier if one did know. It was beginning to snow; his light blurred and disappeared.

I slipped out of my clothes and into my nightgown and crawled into bed. Ten minutes later I admitted it was no use—I would never sleep until he was safely back, and meanwhile I was freezing. I put on my robe and hurried down to the kitchen. Grace was in one rocker; I took the other.

"I can't sleep, Grace, for thinking of that black water."

"No more can I," Grace said.

But we did: we both did. He had kicked open the door and come in before we awoke—come in with the child in his arms, bundled in that blanket but alive, nearly frozen, eyes staring in fright from her peaked, pinched face, but alive.

"Here," he said to Grace, and would have dumped the child in her arms where she sat, but I leapt to my feet and I snatched her from him. "Give her to me!" I said fiercely, and then, less vehemently: "Get yourself into dry clothes—dear God, you look wet to the waist!" And I went back to the rocker and settled her on my lap with her head against my breast.

While Grace wrapped warm towels about her limbs and I coaxed her to drink the hot milk with honey, Justin leaned against the table, watching us. He looked exhausted, I thought; his face was grim and without a trace of triumph.

"We'd better get her home," he said.

"Go change your clothes first!" I said sharply. When he didn't move: "Do as *I* tell you!"

"I'll get the car," Grace offered. A flicker of a smile crossed her face. "I've been hankerin' to drive it for a long time." She bundled herself into her coat and stumped out.

I touched the child's hair. It wasn't the kind you could stroke, being stiff and skimpy and somewhat greasy. I patted it.

"Where did you find her?"

"In that damn hole in the bank by the graveyard."

I stared at him in concern. "So far?"

"I didn't think she was in there, the crack was so small a squirrel would have trouble, you'd think. By morning the snow would have closed it."

Wading for hours every step a struggle . . . then down that hill to look and look in the black waters sucking hungrily through the snow. He was looking for his sister Ernestine . . . he couldn't stop looking . . .

"I'll have Pentacost fix that door," he said. "Fix those hinges so you can close it, and put a good latch on." He crossed the room, his step heavy. At the door he looked back, and saw me watching him. "If I were to paint you,"

he said abruptly, "it would be like that—like a madonna."

I stared after him, shocked as much by the undercurrent of anger in his voice as by his words.

When Justin had changed to dry clothes, and had gathered up the child, and the Landrover had made off (somewhat jerkily) down the lane, for the third time that night I went to bed but not to sleep. My blood did not seem to have calmed down at all, from his words, from the anger, barely suppressed, with which they'd been suffused. From the pressure of the child in my arms as well. I thought back: had I ever held a child before? Never. Well, I'd known how, even so.

And when he came back, would he think to stop by my door to tell me how Clemmy had been welcomed? I heard the Landrover go past the house to the barn, and after a bit I heard the north door open, and close, and the bolts slide home. And then, though I lay a long time awake, I heard nothing more. He must have gone through the library to the studio and so up the twisting stairs, for he never came past my door at all.

Ten days later I heard the child again. Because I had so hoped all that was over and done with, it was a crushing disappointment. Like thinking a malignancy you've had out is really gone, I thought, but there it is again. I *can't* be hearing it, I thought. I'm really *not* hearing it!

It was a Thursday afternoon, and the Rowdons had gone off to Welkin. Justin had finished Grace's portrait that very morning, and was consumed by a kind of subdued exultation at lunch: apparently the work had gone well. He thought he'd go into Welkin, he said, and get the hardware Pentacost needed for the door.

"I told him he might as well make one for the root cellar, too, while he was about it. You'd think he expects to hold off an Indian attack: they're both of oak, two inches thick. I may have a bit of trouble finding hinges heavy enough this side of White River. Do you have any errands you'd rather not entrust to me and would like to attend to yourself?"

"In White River?" I shook my head. "I thought I'd give that walnut tea table its first coat of varnish."

He shrugged. "I may not be back for dinner. Don't plan anything for me."

So now, in the quiet of the empty house, so quiet I could clearly hear the kettle hissing on the stove (I was working in the kitchen by the north window; the directions said Keep Away from Open Flame, but I really couldn't do that in this house unless I took my work outside), when, as I said, my hope that that particular aberration of my brain had been safely encased in scar tissue was snuffed out by the cry from the room overhead.

It's not there. I sha'n't go and look. I hear nothing. *Nothing.* I am not daft. I shall finish this table, and clean my brush, and put my things out of the way on the shelf in the pantry; and if Emelie Stark wants to come in here in the kitchen bringing with her her lover's child I'll . . . I'll fix her a cup of tea! Dear God, she'd be *welcome!* I've no woman to talk to, you can't count Grace, she holds me at more than arm's length, as she ought, I suppose. I've a husband, of course, after a fashion, but nothing I say to him ever comes out quite as I mean it to, and if it does, he takes it another way. So come down, whoever you are, Emelie or Constance or Catherine O'Reilly, and we'll talk about your confinements, if you want, and how soon the baby will cut a tooth, and whom he looks like . . . no, we won't talk about that . . .

The child was silent.

"You see?" I said aloud. "There wasn't anything there." And having finished the last drop leaf, I stood up, and found my knees were weak as water and my face wet with sweat.

I had eaten my supper—in the kitchen, guiltily, with all the doors locked that mattered—when about seven thirty Justin returned, hungry.

"Sorry to put you to so much trouble. I planned to dine out but the thought of my own company bored me." He began to spoon up the soup I had speedily heated; he, of course, was properly at the table in the dining room. "It would have been less bother simply to nail that crypt door shut, and spike a board across the new door to the root cellar—we aren't likely to need to use it—but Penta-cost wouldn't hear of it. 'Bad luck to go changin' things about,' he told me, 'specially what's not yours to change.' I thought he was being unnecessarily blunt, myself, so I

took this opportunity to point out that the only bad luck I could foresee would be his—no more hideaway for his trophies of the hunt. Of course he was applying blackmail: no workable door, no Pentacost for his portrait. I start on him tomorrow.”

It took you long enough, I thought. You've been gone all afternoon. You could go and come twice, for all I would know. Walk in . . . park the car and come in through the woods . . .

I said, “Did you have any luck with the hinges?”

“Finally. There was nothing in White River or Lebanon, either—not in the weight I wanted. Everybody would be happy to special-order. I'll let you know, said I, and stopped for coffee in a country store in Lyme, and there they were. Shows you never know.”

That's true enough, I thought. You never, never know.

I sat in the south parlor and read, and about ten o'clock I went up to bed. I don't know what time it was that I awoke or was awakened. It was getting on toward morning, for the moon was setting behind a veil of clouds. The door to the bathroom was slightly ajar, so when the child began to cry in the Hogarth room beyond, there was just the one wall between, and I could hear it plainly, so plainly that I could no longer pretend I heard nothing. There might be nothing to hear, but I heard it . . . I heard it!

I went over and gently swung the door to. It shut with a sharp click; at once the child was silent. I stood there with my heart pounding as if to burst my chest and I thought, if he'd doing this, he's a *monster* . . . oh God, it's horrible . . . it's *vile* . . .

For nothing on earth would I go and look in the Hogarth room, not even for Tamarack. Let Justin look—why have a husband if I can't ask him to go see if there's a ghost? He would think I was daft: let him. I nearly was, at that. Then if he *was* doing it, it would cheer him to see how nearly daft I was, wouldn't it? But if he was in his room, he couldn't very well be in the Hogarth room, could he? And that would prove something . . .

I forced the sleeves of my flannel gown into the velvet robe, and with shaking fingers fastened the satin frogs. There was no need for a candle; the sinking moon sent its phantom light deep into the house. As silently as the

moonlight that escorted me, I crept past the stairwell to the connecting passage, where, under a compulsion I could not resist, I glanced toward the west wing. The door at the foot of the stairs stood open, and the door to the Hogarth room beyond. I could not doubt it was so: I could make out the squarish shape of the window looking to the moonstruck sky.

I slunk along the wall toward the east wing, crept like a thief down the five steps to the door, and groped for the handle.

It was locked tight, and there was no key.

Chapter Thirty-two



I turned and fled back along the stairwell and down the curving stair and through the library to the door to the studio, praying all the while that he hadn't locked that door, too. But the door gave easily and with a gasp of thankfulness I shut it behind me.

The snow to the east was drifted high, reflecting the moonlight into the room. Two faces swam toward me: William, propped against the wall, and Grace, still on the easel. I hurried past them to the stairs; if I were not quick enough, he could get back to bed before I caught him . . . though I heard not a sound, only my slippered feet whispering on the bare treads of the stair.

The door to the lilacs room was closed. I put my ear to the panel and listened, all the while watching the way I had come for that darker blackness that would be him returning. I saw nothing; I heard nothing. Very slowly I turned the knob; very slowly I opened the door. The hinge spoke once.

I did not know if the room were occupied or empty, for I heard not another sound. Dear God, *why* did the moonlight shine on the floor, shine on the east wall, shine on Israel Carson's portrait hanging like a demon's mask over the fireplace, yet leave the bed in darkness?

I drew nearer. And now I could see that indeed he was there: he was on his side with his back to the door, one arm flung across the coverlet as if in appeal. How vulnerable is a man asleep, I thought; how open to harm! Unless he were faking, of course. If he had raced back to bed, his pulse would not be as slow as if his sleep were genuine . . . but I dared not check. If he was faking he already knew I was there and he knew I still suspected him—suspected him more than ever. If he was truly asleep, then he was innocent . . .

Suddenly it seemed to me madness that I had come, and of the utmost urgency that I get out of this room before he knew I was spying—what else could one call it? Spying on him as he lay sleeping! I turned, and took an infinitely cautious step.

A board creaked.

He sprang from the bed and pinioned me in a grip of steel, my left wrist twisted behind me and an arm crooked about my chest. For a split second he held me so; then, as if he disbelieved his senses, he slid his hand down my body. At once he released me.

"Why, Emelie!" he said in a welcoming voice. "I thought you were a thief come after Israel—a mad thought, I admit, but I didn't dare believe it was you!" He turned me to face him; the moonlight gleamed on his naked shoulders. "Oh, my dear, how sweet—how sweetly generous you are!" and he bent forward as if to kiss me.

I put my two hands on his chest and pushed. "No, wait—wait!" I said.

"We've waited long enough," he said, and pulled me hard against him, and commenced to kiss me—my hair, my eyelids, my cheek, my throat—all the while I was gasping, as if this were some kind of cheap farce, "Stop it! Justin please stop it! Stop—stop—"

He stopped my mouth, then, and holding me so with the one hand, with the other he groped for the fastenings on my robe. I managed to free my mouth and I said, "Please—I don't want to make love!"

"What did you come for, then? Surely you're not after Israel?" His arms tightened.

"I—I heard the child again!" I said desperately. "I came to—to ask you to come s-see if you could hear it too!"

At that he laughed softly. "A likely tale! There isn't any child crying, Emelie, and you don't really think there is." He kissed me. "Come now, admit it—it was just an excuse—" He kissed me again, and now succeeded in unfastening my robe. "But you don't need any excuses, my darling, my sweet Emelie—"

"There really was! I really heard it!" I was almost sobbing. "Please, *please* believe me—" He was holding me too closely for me to get my hands between us.

"All right, my love, I believe you." His lips were in my hair, on my brow. "You hear it—yes, you do—but it's nothing to be afraid of, my dearest. It's just that this is no way to live—you're hungry, too—my God, Emelie, this is *no* way to live!"

So that's what he thought! Did he think I'm that 'hungry' that my mind would play me tricks, terrify me, lure me here into this farcical—this appalling predicament? For without releasing me, he freed first one arm, then the other, and my robe fell away.

"No *no*!" I said frantically. "That can't be right—I'm sure it can't be right—"

Justin caught me by the hands, then, and half laughing, half impatient, drew me to the bed. "Don't lose heart now!" he said. "My sweet Emelie, there's nothing to be so shy about—after all, I *am* your husband! How can you feel you're doing something sinful? The sin is in the *not* doing, Emelie darling—"

And still I tried to hold him off. "Justin, please!" I begged. "You don't understand—I don't *want*—"

But I did, I think. Whether I knew it or not, I wanted. I remember thinking—as Justin, baffled by my attempts to deny him, said with savage impatience, "For God's sake, Emelie, are you playing games? Because I'm not!"—I remember thinking he was so strong it was useless to struggle . . . how strong a man is, after all—a good thing perhaps or the human race wouldn't have made it . . . and anyway, did I want to die a virgin?

And so I yielded, and he possessed me, and that was that.

That's that, I thought. *And what of it?* Dear God, what had I made such a fuss about? A sudden sharp pain, a few moments—minutes, perhaps, I did not know—when I didn't feel I belonged to myself, I belonged to someone

else, I was being used, I was quite literally the possession of the man whose face above mine I could barely see; what his expression was I did not know, withdrawn, perhaps, internalized, intent on what I assumed was his pleasure. *He could be anybody*, I thought; *I could be anybody*. And: *they make too much of it*, I thought, when he was done.

Except there is always the time *after* to be got through, as well as the time *while*.

Justin rose and lit the brass lamp by the bed. Then he went to the cupboard and took out a robe of some sort and girded it about him. Pulling the bedclothes to my chin as I furtively tried to restore order to my nightgown, I watched him cross to the fireplace; as unhurried and deliberate as if he'd been routinely awakened by the clock, he stirred the fire and added wood.

"Now I think we'd better have a talk," he said evenly. The light was in my eyes and I tried to shade my face with the sheet; he took the lamp and set it on the mantel. "How long was it you said you were married?"

My mouth went dry. "Three months."

"That I find hard to believe. Or I am exceedingly clumsy."

I couldn't look at him. "You know it wasn't you, it was me," I said in a low voice. "I—I thought you knew—I thought you'd guessed, anyway. Things you said—little digs you made—"

"Emelie, I swear it never occurred to me your marriage wasn't consummated. My mind simply does not run along such lines."

I burned with shame at what he must be thinking. I wanted to hide my face, pull up the covers and hide . . .

"What did you have against him?" he said, as if idly curious: it was no affair of his, to be sure; still, he was only human.

"Have against him?" I echoed, aghast. "Dear God! I loved him!" But what kind of love was it, I thought in anguish, that couldn't find a way to help? "I was so—so stupid—"

"I confess I don't begin to understand you," Justin said. "You were married to another man willing not to consummate the marriage? Precisely in what way were you stupid? Because you loved this fellow? Or because you

agreed to this—coming from me, I admit the phrase is laughable, but it's none the less appropriate—this damnable immoral scheme? 'I'll wear your ring and bear your name in return for—' For what? What did he offer you? What kind of a bargain did you strike that time?"

"It wasn't like that and you know it! You *know* it!" I was stumbling out of bed, groping for my slippers, for my robe. "He never wanted me and you *know* it!" I sobbed.

He was helping me on with the robe, helping pull those flannel sleeves under the satin-lined velvet, buttoning the satin loops at my throat and at my waist.

"I do not know it," he said calmly. "Whatever I said that makes you think so was said as a joke, and about something else. Now listen to me—oh, for the love of God, is there nothing in this room a woman can weep into?" And he looked about him with rough impatience, then yanked the pillowcase off and offered me that. "*Listen* to what I say, Emelie: I did not know you were a virgin—do you think I'd've subjected you to such a romp if I did?—and it follows I did not know your husband 'didn't want you'—your phrase. As if any man could be married to you and not want to make love to you!" He shook his head, smiling. "Come over by the fire. It's time we talked, heart to heart if you can manage it."

I accepted a blanket about my shoulders and the pillow as cushion; he sat on a corner of the hearth. I stared at the flames, and he neither moved nor spoke, which made it easier to pretend I was talking only to myself.

"You have to believe I loved Bard," I began awkwardly. "You have to accept that, even if it doesn't much look as if I did. He told me again and again it didn't have anything to do with me, but of course it did. He wanted to marry me badly enough *before* we were married—it was only afterward he—he wished he hadn't." I glanced at Justin, and away. "That first night he said he was tired, overtired, he said—the whole long ghastly day—the farce of a ceremony—the horrible reception—"

"Good God! Those were his very words?"

"Oh, no! No—that's the way I've thought about it since. Revisionist memories." I tried to smile. "I mean, I was so happy, so thrilled and—and eager, and then it was such a—a travesty . . ." I felt sick. The memory of my emotions that night—a faint apprehension outweighed

by anticipation, and then my bewilderment, my dismay, above all my disappointment—still could fill me with self-loathing. "The next night he had too much to drink," I went on in a low voice, "and he went to sleep in a chair. The *next* night he brought a book to bed, and said he wanted to read for a while, and he read, and read, and read, and finally I fell asleep. It went on like that for— for about a month. I didn't know what to do. I wondered if I was supposed to—to suggest he make love, or something—if he was waiting for me out of c-consideration—" It was hard to breathe; I felt now as I had then, as if I were suspended in a vacuum. "Finally I asked him what was the matter, and he said I didn't appeal to him. He didn't f-find me interesting as a woman, he said." I stared at my clasped hands.

"What the hell was he interested in, then? Men?"

"Oh, no—no, I don't think so," I stammered. "I never—I mean, he had no close friends." It was true—poor Bard! He'd had no real friends at all. I had been too wrapped up in my own wretchedness to realize it at the time. What did I know of love, anyway? To have thought I loved a man and never to have guessed at his loneliness, his anguish, the extremes to which he'd be driven! "I don't know why he married me, actually," I said. "I thought he loved me as I loved him—body and soul." I flushed. "It's a s-stupid phrase—trite—but that's how I felt."

"It's neither trite nor stupid, Emelie. 'Body and soul'—that's the only kind of love worth a damn. Go on."

"Well, you see, he was a—a very beautiful person. Very vulnerable. Beauty was terribly important to him. Things around him had to be beautiful. People, too. He would say, 'She's really beautiful, you know,' and I thought he meant spiritually or intellectually as well as—as physically. I mean—" I was groping again, once again lost in the dark woods of my bewilderment, of my pain and longing—"I thought he really knew me, and perhaps thought of me as a 'beautiful person' too—that he really liked me as a friend as well as loved me—but that all along he was artist enough to see that I wasn't *really* beautiful—in my face or in my body, I mean—and I thought it didn't matter to him. But then, that night when

he—he s-seemed—I mean, he couldn't—couldn't I-look at me—”

It was all so humiliating, and so shameful, and in some obscure way degrading, that I should be sharing with anyone, even with Justin, the corrosive details of my marriage. I was suddenly appalled, as if I had awakened in an unfamiliar room to find myself babbling intimacies to a stranger . . . a stranger with cold black eyes as angry and as contemptuous as those in the painted face glaring down at me from above the mantel.

Justin had risen to his feet in one lithe movement. “An artist, you say. A painter. A man who takes one look at his bride and damn near faints. The whole damn day has worn him out, more’s the pity! What did he plead—headache? Or menstrual cramps?” He laughed, an ugly laugh. “But you learn, don’t you? You don’t make the same mistake twice. Watch out for these *artists*—these *painters*—don’t entangle yourself too deeply without checking them out! They can fool you. They walk around looking like men and sounding like men, some of them, but you never can tell. Is he really a man, that poor creature who goes around painting pretty pictures? What a hell of a thing it is, *damn* it, damn it all—what a hell of a curse! To want to grab it—seize the moment—salvage it—get it down on paper, on canvas, in ink, in paint—but never once really succeeding, it’s never once what you *really* feel! And you’re driven—when you do anything else you condemn yourself for wasting time, and for this burning, this all-consuming obsession you get the raised eyebrow, the mincing walk, the smirks and knowing smiles. Why *of course* you had to know, didn’t you? Slipping in here with the first transparent excuse you could dream up—”

I too was on my feet. “I have *never*,” I said in a shaking voice, “in all my *life* known such an egomaniac! I did *not* come here to check you out!” I was nearly choking. “As for your comments about Bard—” my voice broke—“I think they are *despicable*, and I *despise* myself for telling you anything about my marriage! I feel I’ve taken his suffering and exposed it to a *barbarian* who can’t do anything but laugh at people’s griefs—oh, *do* get out of my way!”

He stepped aside at once. “Would you like me to es-

cort you safely past all the bogeymen?" he said through his teeth.

"The sooner I put the full distance of this house between us the happier I will be!" And I jerked the door open before he could reach it, and slammed it shut in his face.

The darkness struck me like a wave. I groped my way as if I were blind. Where was the connecting door? If only the key were on this side—

It was, and the door that had been so unyielding before now opened easily. All the doors through to the Hogarth room were open, and I could see the vague blur where a window looked to the west. And then my heart gave a great leap and began to thud so painfully I almost cried out—I almost cried out with terror.

The last wisps of moonlight sifted in through the empty window . . . empty save for a silent figure motionless against the glass, looking out over the orchard at the bleached arms of dead trees thrusting through the snow like bones on a battlefield, looking down on the white mound of the root cellar, that mound like a crypt, its secrets buried under a blanket of snow.

Wavering, as faint to the ear as the blurred figure by the window was to the eye, came the wail of an infant. Beyond all doubt it came from the Hogarth room.

I slammed the connecting door to, and ran. Blundering against the walls in the thick dark, I found his door and flung it open.

"Justin, Justin!" I hurled myself across the room. "It's not you! Oh *God* oh thank God! I *know* it's not you!"

He had turned from the window and taken a quick stride toward me. I seized the front of his robe and clung there, sobbing over and over, "Oh thank God thank God! I know it's not you!"

He covered my hands with his. "What's not me?" he said. "It's all right, Emelie—hush—it's all right—"

"The child!" I sobbed. "It—it was crying—but it's not you, don't you see? *He's* not you! It *couldn't* be, because it's there—*he's* there—and you're here—you're *here!*" And I began to laugh, and tried to stop, and started to cry again.

He stood so, staring at me and holding my hands in

his. "Stop it, Emelie," he said firmly. "Stop it, you hear? There's no child."

"Oh yes there *is*! Please, Justin, *please* come and you'll hear it—maybe you'll s-see him too—then you'll know I'm not crazy—I'm really not!" He started to pick up the lamp but I said, "No, *no*! The light might f-frighten it—might warn him—"

He took me by the hand, then, and we went along to the north room. I said in a whisper, "I was right near here—"

We stood still, listening. There was not a sound anywhere.

"And where was the crying?" His breath stirred my hair.

"In the Hogarth room," I breathed.

He left me then, feeling for the door. I heard him fumble with the knob. "Stuck," he muttered. Then: "Damn," he said in a normal voice. "The fool knob's come off in my hand."

"How could it?" I said. "I didn't have any trouble—" My voice was rising. "I just had it open and that's when I—when I s-saw—when I heard—" I began to cry again. "You just *locked* it again—you know you did! You did it on purpose so you wouldn't h-have to look! You—you probably did the crying, too! You're probably a—a ventriloquist—" The notion struck me as funny, and I began to laugh.

He came over and struck me on one cheek, then the other. The blows were exceedingly light, as one slaps oneself to keep awake, but they sobered me.

"You are insulting," he said in a cold voice. "I would not stoop to terrify the likes of you. I can't make sense out of your garbled stories. I don't know what kind of hangups you have, and I don't give a damn. You mean nothing to me, do you understand? Nothing. Cope with your own neuroses, or repressions, or whatever ails you. I'm fed up to here with them!"

"Justin," I whispered, "go and look—please oh please—"

"Oh, damn," he said wearily. "All right. Let me get my boots on at least. I swear I'm like to suffer frostbite."

In a few moments he was back with the lamp. He'd pulled on trousers and a sweater, but he was not wearing

boots, just heavy socks that were as silent on the floorboards as were my slippers. He escorted me down the twisting stair and back the way I had come, through the studio and the library and up the curving stair to my room, where he set the lamp on the table. "Keep this; I have a flashlight. You stay here."

And then he was gone down the hall. I laid the velvet robe over the rocker and I crawled into bed and pulled the covers to my face, and waited. It seemed a long time, but I don't suppose it was more than three minutes or so when he was back. "Nothing there," he said curtly. "Nothing in the Hogarth room, the storage closet, wash-room, or north bedrooms. I looked in all the corners. No ghosts, Emelie, and no abandoned infants. Shall I leave the lamp?"

"Since there are no ghosts, I don't need it, do I?" I tried to speak as coldly as he.

"Door open or closed?"

"Oh—c-closed," I said, my voice cracking.

"Good night," he said stonily, and shut the door. I slipped from my bed and went over and turned the key. Noisily.

Somewhere in the darkness an owl hooted. I went over to the window. A yellow glow wavered on the mist, and then, growing brighter, steadied and was still. So Justin had gone directly to the lilacs room. A blurred shadow cut the light briefly, then again. He must be walking about, back and forth, back and forth. The owl called again. It did not sound at all like a child crying.

I crawled between the cold sheets and lay staring at the windows. He was wrong about why I came. He was wrong about everything. The child *had* cried. There *had* been someone . . . something there. I had not come for the reason he thought. I had not wanted that quick, that brutal lovemaking. I had not wanted *any* lovemaking. I was not in love with him. I was not daft. I was not hungry. I was not hysterical. I was sane . . . wasn't I?

I rolled over on my back and I put my hands to my cheeks, where he had struck me . . . barely struck me. I slid my fingers to my eyes, my forehead, down my throat, where his kisses had fallen. I hadn't had to do anything. Just be there.

It wasn't me. It wasn't my fault, Bard—don't you see?

* * *

The next morning I could choose to breakfast early or I could breakfast in my room; I could wait until he was finished or I could join him as usual. Though it would hardly be *as usual*, I thought grimly. But I couldn't spend the next four years dodging him at mealtimes; I might as well take the plunge.

Chin high, I swept into the dining room, gazing first out the window, then at William's kindly face, then into the hall, where Mrs. Grimes was stumping up the stair, grumbling audibly. The man across the table could be as invisible as the ghosts he'd gone searching for during the night.

During the night . . . my face on fire, I commenced to drink my coffee. I could feel my self-possession crumbling. I can't carry it off, I thought frantically. What'll I do what'll I do?

"Remind that woman to use the pantry stairs, William," Justin said.

"Yes, sir. I believe she tried to, but they're locked."

I could hear Mrs. Grimes's heavy step overhead. She's collecting my nightdress, I thought, my eyes on my plate. Perhaps she'll just think my time caught me unawares . . .

We were alone.

"I warned you to stay out of the east wing," he said, as impersonally as if we'd just been introduced. "If you do, you need have no fear last night will be repeated."

I said in a shaking voice, "I wish I could say I can't imagine what you think of me. Unfortunately I can—your behavior then and now makes it plain enough. What you cannot imagine is what I think of you!" I drew a deep breath. "You're convinced I'm involved in a—*a* physiological research project but am too ridiculously inhibited to be frank about it, aren't you? Well, let me tell you, *Mr. St. John*, in my opinion the whole thing is *vastly* overrated and doesn't *begin* to be worth the bother!"

His lips twitched: "You devastate me." Then, quietly and evenly: "You see I have a choice, Emelie. Either you're faking or you're not. I prefer to think that you are. What your reasons are, what you are up to, is your affair. It's possible you're provoked that I don't share your belief in ghosts, and for want of something else to occupy your time and energy, you're enjoying a bit of tomfoolery,

you'd hoped at my expense. Well, I'm too old for such games, my dear. Now eat your breakfast and forget about last night." His eyes grew hard. "Though I invite you to join me in my most earnest and heartfelt hope," he added bitingly, "that you will have no further reason to regret it."

"Dear God," I whispered, "what an appalling . . ." For the first time in a long, long time I was afraid of him. And of myself, of what I could put tongue to. "You don't think that at all!" I said. "You know me better than that! You know very well I'm not making anything up! You know I'm no good at lying—you told me so once, didn't you? You can see through me, you boasted. You can see through me *now*, and you *know* I'm not involved in some moronic charade, you *know* I don't like appearing d-daft, it's humiliating as all *hell and damnation* to be afraid, and not even know what I'm afraid of! You think I *like* running and flinging myself at you and begging for help? Begging for *your* help? Dear God!" Justin didn't move, or take his eyes from my face. "I'm not faking, and you know it! What you really think is that I'm losing my mind, don't you? *Don't* you?"

He said in a low voice, "God help me, I don't know."

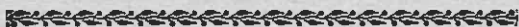
"Oh, come now!" I said. "You must think so, or you'd tell me I'm not, wouldn't you? Are you afraid if you told me I'm not losing my mind it might help me to—to get it back?"

His face was white. "What do you want me to say, Emelie? Tell me what answer you want, and I'll give it to you, because you won't believe me in any case, will you? Whatever I say?"

"No," I said.

And I began to cry, then. Shamelessly, and openly, like a child. Tears streaming down, I walked out of the room and up the curving stairs.

Chapter Thirty-three



From my windows I could see Pentacost coming along the edge of the woods, wary as any deer. Today I couldn't face him. With his childlike directness he was bound to ask, "Why, Emmy—what ails ye? Is your heart a-breakin'?" I considered the question carefully. Was I lying to myself when I said I did not love him? No, I did not—not with my mind, whatever my traitor/body was up to. Whatever my traitor/body wanted: that he should not sit there, coolly stirring his coffee, light-years removed from me as he said, ". . . my heartfelt hope that you will have no further reason . . ."; that he would put his arms around me and say those things (if say them he must) with his lips against my hair. I could bear them, then. Fool that my body was.

I kept to my room, and did not come down for lunch, because of course Pentacost would be staying. When Grace came to tell me it was ready, I said for her to say I wasn't well.

"Shall I have William bring you a tray, Mrs. St. John?"

"Please," I said, staring after her. *Mrs. St. John*. Did it make so much difference, then, that impersonal initiation? Vastly overrated, I'd told him, and so it was. At least it wasn't at all what my reading had led me to expect. Either I was not like other women, or they exaggerated their sensations, because I hadn't thought the pain so very much; certainly I'd had no reason to cry out, as they did in books. How had Justin been so sure, then? Well, after all, it wasn't *his* first time.

I accepted the tray from William and sat before the fire and tried to discipline my disorderly thoughts. *Did* he think I was pretending to hear the child? No, he knew I was not pretending. Very well, then: assuming I was not daft, or at any rate not daft yet, what was the point of the crying-child incidents? "*One can deduce, Emelie, the*

purpose of anything from its results . . ." If I was afraid I was going daft, if I was really terrified, what would that accomplish? Why, precisely what it did: it would drive me into his room and into his arms. *Now, then . . .*

But what would I do in case there were, in the biting phrase he'd used when we were devising that damnable contract, 'an inconvenient biological repercussion'—what would I do then? Not just this winter; not just next summer . . . *Till death do us part*, we'd promised in that empty ceremony, and we'd neither of us meant it. Was it possible to mean something retroactively? Because of those few brief moments in his bed— ". . . and they shall be one flesh," says the beautiful phrase at the very beginning—was everything changed between us forevermore, so that no matter what separate and divergent roads we took, we would still be joined? *That* would be a "further reason to regret it" beyond all fairness!

Oh, what ailed me? Talk about revisionist memories! Justin hadn't been tender or considerate—he'd moved swiftly and ruthlessly to bed me, once he got the chance. I was sentimentalizing what had been nothing to him, whatever it had been to me. I didn't understand him at all! Except that, however he chose to evade a reply, he *did* think I was, if not already daft, then in danger of becoming so; I thought, watching him over dinner as warily as he was watching me.

"You needn't be on guard against me, Emelie," he said quietly. "You've nothing further to fear from me. I wish you would believe you've nothing to fear in Tamarack at all. You see—" he hesitated—"fear isn't like cancer, my dear. If some one mistakenly tells you you have a malignancy, that in itself will not afflict you with one. But fear springs into being when you lend it belief. If I agree you're going 'daft'—your word—I water and feed your fear, I help it flourish. Try to trust me—"

Would he *never* stop? "Oh, I do!" I assured him. "And I'll trust you at once with the news, just as soon as I know myself, whether there will be any 'inconvenient biological repercussions'!"

He was silent the rest of the meal.

The next day I resolved not to cower in my room but boldly joined artist and sitter at lunch. I took pains to

thank Pentacost for what I understood was a truly splendid door across the crypt by the graveyard.

"Where were you that night, Pentacost?"

"Snug in bed where I b'longed," he said virtuously. "Nobuddy give me a thought, and I never saw no lights. That Deese—he oughta look after his begottens better. Speakin' o' doors, you want me to help cut ice, Justin? Fill that double-thick door I made ye with sawdust 'n' shut off the vent hole an' I betcha the ice'd keep right through to next winter."

It turned out that the root cellar wasn't a root cellar at all, and it hadn't been a smoke house in Pentacost's memory; it was excellent for the storage of ice, and had been used for that purpose all through the tenure of Henry Carson.

"Maybe next year," Justin said, "if we haven't gone modern by then."

Throughout the next week Justin subjected me to a course in mental health. He began that same night at dinner, bringing no book behind which to barricade himself, but instead watching me thoughtfully as he ate, now and then venturing a remark designed, presumably, to bolster my tottering mind. At one time he commented, that once was seldom enough, and I shouldn't anticipate trouble. To this I deigned no reply. He then suggested I ought not to interpret his simile of the sparkling wine double-corked as in any way describing a desirable state of affairs. "Feelings that are bottled up ferment, and can be dangerous," he said. "You ought to open up, Emelie—share your worries."

"I was taught that's selfish," I said coldly. "Everyone has enough of his own. I can't expect other people to take on my troubles."

"Not even if they ask to?"

"People don't want to help. They just want to be in the know, so they can laugh at you."

He regarded me reflectively for a moment. Then: "Have you heard that child crying in the last day or two?"

"No, I haven't." *Nor seen anything, either.* "And if you think that proves any stupid Freudian nonsense—"

"It doesn't prove anything, of course," he agreed. "But if you think you hear the child, come and tell me at once."

I swear I'll not laugh, or insist you imagine it. I give you full permission—" he smiled wryly—"to interrupt me at work, should you hear it during the day. I've been meaning to tell you that I'll not go away again and leave you to cope alone—I've left you alone far too much. In the evenings I intend to join you in the south parlor; I don't think it's healthy for you to spend so much time in solitary. And at night—well, I suggest I move into that room across from yours. You need be under no apprehension I'll annoy you, but if you like, I can ask William to install a good stout bolt."

"That won't be necessary," I said in a choked voice.

"I think it is. The lilacs room is far too inaccessible."

"I mean the *bolt*!" My face was flaming. "Dear God, what would the Rowdons think!"

"I couldn't care less."

"Well, I do! She—she calls me 'Mrs. St. John' now—"

"Congratulations." And he smiled briefly, an odd little smile as if he were almost sneering, I thought, but not at me.

On another evening he dwelt on the subject of ghosts. When he said he didn't believe in them, he explained, he meant he didn't believe in wisps of white or clanking chains or nonsense of that sort. "I believe in the ghosts that haunt us and keep us from happiness, ghosts in our minds and on our conscience," he said. "I mean the memory of our mistakes, Emelie—the cruelties we inflict on one another, unwittingly or not. I think you are haunted by your husband's suicide—rightly or wrongly, you've assumed you were responsible—"

"I don't want to talk about it! What good can talking do?"

"It can keep it from fermenting any more," he said. "It can keep it from shattering the bottle, damn it, and scattering shards of glass through the heart!"

I put down my fork. "It was my fault! *Must* you dwell on it? Dear God, I'd rather you read straight through the meal!"

He said no more about it until later, when he'd followed me into the parlor. "In what way was it your fault?"

I whirled to face him. "Because I didn't go, that's why! He telephoned me—he said he was going to kill himself! But he'd said that before, so I didn't believe him—I was

actually annoyed he'd called me! I'd told him and *told* him to leave me alone. I hung up the phone and then . . . then I got to thinking, and s-something about the way he'd sounded worried me, and I tried to call his dorm, but the line was busy. Finally I—I decided to go—"I was as out of breath as if I'd just rerun that nightmare race across the campus. "He hadn't even locked his door. I—I thought he'd wanted to be found . . . to be stopped." I fought down nausea. "His hands were c-clutching the plastic—I think he'd changed his mind—oh, *God*, if only I—if only—"

"You didn't drive him to it, Emelie, so stop trying to hog all the blame," Justin said roughly. "There isn't a man on earth who doesn't have reason to kill himself—or reason to live. The choice is his own."

"Look, just because *you* can't conceive of killing yourself over anything I'd do or say—"

"I can't imagine killing myself over any woman," Justin said, and actually laughed. "I can't imagine killing myself, period."

I stared at him. Neither can I, I thought. Not over any man. Not for any reason . . . period. No doubt we're both too selfish.

"Tell me," Justin went on conversationally, "when you told him to leave you alone, was this before or after you separated?"

"Oh, after we—after I'd filed for divorce."

"You didn't give him anything like the *yes I do, no I don't* treatment you dealt me?"

"Dear *God*! I—I—"

"Accusation denied. Now tell me: your husband was how old?"

"Twenty-one," I whispered.

"At that age, any—" he broke off. "Did it occur to either of you two children he ought to see a doctor?"

"Oh, he wouldn't! He said I had no idea what I was asking—he simply wouldn't humiliate himself . . ." Shivering, I moved closer to the hearth.

"Didn't he find it humiliating to leave your needs unattended to? Or did he think you had none?"

"Of course he was very sensitive to—to me, so I pretended it didn't make any difference, he needn't worry about me—"

Justin gave an exclamation of impatience. "Scarcely helpful, I should think. My dear Emelie, if your husband's health had been normal, he would have been able to consummate the marriage. Your pretense that it made no difference to you must have been deadly—there the wretched fellow is, already a failure in his own eyes, and it doesn't distress his bride unduly. That alone could unman him, I should think."

"You're *agreeing* with me, don't you see? It *was* my fault!"

"No, I am not agreeing with you!" he said sharply. "You were too young to know that sometimes it's cruel to be kind. It would have been far better to have told your husband you couldn't bear it, you loved him and wanted him and he'd just have to do his part. What's an hour in a doctor's office compared to a shattered marriage? Now you're thinking I'm cruel to be so blunt. Emelie, don't you see you can't lug this load around all the rest of your life?"

"You have an odd way of helping me lay it down! Telling me I handled everything in the worst possible way!"

"I didn't mean that. I just want you to see it would have been better if you could have told him your real feelings. Perhaps you would have, in time, but you didn't give yourselves much time, did you? Whose idea was it to call it quits? Yours?"

"Bard's," I whispered. *Get out! Get out! I can't stand the sight of you!* "He—it wouldn't have worked, what you say I ought to have said. He didn't want me around. He told me to go. He said the sight of me—" I swallowed—"made him sick."

"So you graciously agreed to go?"

"I said he might as well have an annulment. Since we didn't have a marriage. Bard said—" *Christ! What are you trying to do—strip me naked?*—"Bard asked me to get a divorce, it would cause less talk. I agreed to it, because I could see he felt pilloried—" *I'll kill myself, do you hear?* "That was the first time he said he'd kill himself. If I told anybody, he said. I never told anybody, not while he was alive. I lied to the judge. I told him Bard s-struck me. I lied to my father. I told him I—I didn't

how I lied . . . Gam . . . my parents . . . Bard—they're all dead."

"But not 'safely' dead, not he," Justin said. "Because he killed himself. Don't you see what a damnable ploy that is? Unanswerable. There you are, forever called to account by your conscience: there must have been *something* you did, or didn't do—right? Suicide, Emelie, is such a coward's trick. You can't parry it, it stabs to the vitals, and it's for all time, a wound that never heals. Nothing you can say or do will ever prove to him, or to anyone, least of all yourself, that you were the innocent bystander, witness but not accomplice to his crime. For that's what it was—a crime against those who loved him. I could feel sorry for your Bard, and I do, right through the whole tale of his failings, his selfishness, his weakness, his parasitic leeching of your self-esteem—right through to his suicide. For me, that kills it. The hell with him."

I was trembling with rage. "Haven't you any *decency*? Are you trying to destroy him all over again?"

"I'm trying to bury him!" Justin said savagely. "I'm trying to stop you from destroying yourself!"

"Oh, don't be stupid!" I cried. "I'm not the suicidal type!"

"There are other ways than plastic sacks, Emelie. Slower, but just as ugly. And just as unfair."

Within a week I knew there would be 'no further repercussions,' and I told myself I was immensely relieved. "You will be delighted to learn," I said, "that you were right: once is not enough."

And again he said, "Congratulations."

I thought he might take my statement as a hint that he need not move into the other south bedroom, but that very day came a brand-new mattress for the black walnut bed—"The other one looked like a hammock," he apologized; "I was afraid parenthesis might set in!"—and in he moved. It was odd, late that evening, to hear his step cross the hall, to hear him moving about. And it was all so unnecessary: he could have stayed in his own kingdom; I could have kept the main house to myself, because I never heard the child, I never saw a shadow lurking by a west window . . . or anywhere else.

In fact, very little of any sort happened, the rest of

February and most of March. It was a relief, of course, to be spared further therapy sessions. It might be that Justin no longer considered them urgent, now that he knew I was safe from the mind-toppling complications of an unwanted pregnancy; perhaps he, too, had begun to hope I was having a remission—he had forced a promise from me that I would tell him if anything disturbed me, and there had been nothing to tell. Possibly his mere presence across the hall, radiating laser beams of skepticism, had silenced the . . . whatever it was. It was as logical an explanation as any, I thought, and far preferable to a Freudian one.

It so happened Pentacost was there the day William brought up two letters for Justin. Across the table I could see GREENSTONE GALLERY, and my heart skipped a beat; was there, at last, an invitation? Justin glanced at me—"You permit?"—and slit open the envelope. Would he—could he—manage to ready a one-man show for the first week in June? "Vale displays a charming hesitation that is strictly unnecessary," Justin grinned. "I'm delighted to accept. Wild horses could not prevent, et cetera." He glanced up at William over the fireplace. "*Pièce de résistance*, don't you agree? I like it better than Grace. I seem to have trouble with women, for some reason." He opened the second envelope. "No doubt they're too complex for me."

William's portrait was a blood-tingling achievement to contemplate. As Pentacost had put it, Justin had painted his insides as well as his outsides. Vale, I thought, would go up like a rocket when she saw it.

"Bad news, is it?" Pentacost said.

Justin was refolding the sheets of the second letter. "No, nothing of the sort—I was hardly expecting it, that's all." He glanced at me. "Your former husband's parents took the trouble to thank me for sending the drawings."

Pentacost cackled. "Kinda long-winded, warn't they?"

"Some people don't know when to stop," Justin said evenly. He handed me the *Horizon*, and I took refuge behind its pages. He's furious, I thought, and realized I was frightened. They must have said something about me, but what? Whatever it was, of course he would believe it . . .

I became aware Pentacost had been under the impres-

sion Justin would give him his portrait when it was finished.

"William's portrait is mine," Justin was saying gently, "and Grace's—"

"How come *she* got to keep *hers*?" Pentacost said, pouting.

"He means Merrill," I said huskily. "I see she's back. It's in the Local News." I cleared my throat. "Mrs. Albert Broome, the former Miss Merrill Mansfield of Tamarack, has returned to her home on River Street." *Of Tamarack!* I thought resentfully, and turned the page. "Oh, no! Nora died—did you know? 'Word has been received of the death of Mrs. Gordon Fenwick in Singapore, where Mrs. Fenwick was on a world cruise with her husband. She had been suffering from a long illness, but her health was reported improved lately, and the end was unexpected, according to a cable received by relatives.'" I looked up. "Who could that be?"

"Merrill, I suppose. Who else?" Justin rose. "Back to work, Pentacost."

What *could* Bard's parents have written about me? Plainly they had said plenty, for his eyes were guarded when they looked at me, and he seemed curiously unmoved by Nora's death.

"What did they say?" I asked him bluntly at dinner. "It must have been truly terrible, the way you look at me!"

"They thanked me for the drawings, as they treasure everything of their son's, and they send me felicitations and to you their hopes that you will be happy."

"I can't believe they said any such thing!"

"If they didn't, they should have," he smiled.

I tried once again. "I *hate* mysteries!" I said coaxingly.

"So do I, and right now I'm finding Pentacost one. It's like trying to paint a dragonfly—all his thoughts are on the surface, like ripples on a lake. Grace was simplicity itself in comparison. Would you like to see her?"

He was inviting me into the east wing! Now why? Out of compassion, or by way of apology, or what? As we proceeded, he opening the doors and I passing through like a . . . like a bride, *it's like in Boston*, I thought; *perhaps they didn't say anything so awful, after all*.

Grace was—Grace: honest, uncompromising, decent. Pentacost—well, of course it wasn't yet finished, but I

couldn't see why Justin thought it was going poorly. I glanced up to meet the hard eyes of Israel Carson, on the north wall between the windows, and said uneasily, "So you brought him down."

"I need my daily dose of nitroglycerine." Justin gave the portrait a mocking half-salute. "I mustn't get faint of heart—you've no idea how much I must get done before the first of June."

He appeared to be in a fever to paint. We met only at meals, where the changing roster of our guests kept me posted on his progress. He finished Pentacost for the second time toward the middle of March, when he recruited Ken Kendall, who went easily. As the month ended, he commenced on Mrs. Grimes (who did not, of course, lunch with us) and entered on negotiations with Deese Ransom to borrow his children.

I had been watching anxiously for signs of spring. But the early weeks of March seemed a kind of intensified winter: strong gusty winds sculpted the surface of the snow, and the returning sun was blinding, reflected off that sea of white.

And then one day Pentacost reported hearing geese go over in the night. "Winter's licked," he said, and he was right, for the winds shifted to the south, and gently, hesitantly, it began to rain. The mists played over the hills, and steadily the snow receded. Ransom's Brook was on a rampage, Justin said, and the *Horizon* reported the Welkin River flooding. On the fourth day the sun came out, grackles were as raucous in an elm as fans at a basketball game, and sweet sap icicles hung wherever the winds had broken a branch on the maples.

By the first of April, the warm and teasing wind had made me restless, and I invented an errand in Welkin. I parked by the Green, where three oldsters sunned themselves on a bench; beyond them came the shambling figure of Gordon Fenwick. I would have to speak to him, of course. What was there to say? Nothing. But it would have to be said.

I called to him, and he looked up. Taken aback—for I had not expected he would be grieved—"I'm s-so very sorry, Gordon," I stammered.

"I wish to hell I'd never sold the River House—she always hankered to live there." He was silent a few mo-

ments, his face working. "I didn't have to be in such a damn hurry, did I?"

I touched his arm, and then (I didn't find the gesture in any way repugnant) I kissed him on the cheek.

"You're a good kid, Emelie," he said huskily. "You don't say, 'What a blessing!'—I swear if I hear any more about what a goddam blessing it is, I'll puke!" Abruptly, he walked on.

There were snowdrops along the Gallery's walls, which was a comfort.

"Darling Emelie!" Vale cried. "Is Justin agreeable?"

"But he was delighted! Didn't he let you know?"

"These artists—they'll drive me to an early grave! Now will *you*, Emelie dear, get me his list? No use asking *him*, I can see that!"

"List?" I said blankly.

"For the opening, my pet. Naturally we'll send to our usuals, but the artist always has his own dear pals, mistresses past and present, enemies he wants to dazzle, et cetera. By next week, love, *if* you please! Oh, and be sure to include his publisher, won't you?"

I could only hope my face didn't reflect a fraction of the bewilderment I felt. At that moment Merrill swept in.

"Emelie, my sweet!" she cried, giving my figure a kind of Instant Survey. "How divinely slender you're looking! Are you in your usual rush, or could you come see what I've done with the River House—I'll give you a cup of tea!"

Moved by curiosity that bordered, I'm afraid, on the morbid, I said I had plenty of time.

And so it was that I walked once again through those tall shadowy rooms: through what used to be the parlor (walls covered with canvases as mindless and simplistic as billboards), through the dining room (Gay Nineties bar with gas light on pedestal), to the sitting room, where I sank awkwardly onto a kind of inflated plastic fungus, gazed in astonishment at the Goddard secretary—in spite of its Venus's-flytraps, it looked shockingly reactionary—and fought down an hysterical desire to laugh. There was nothing whatsoever left of Gam anywhere. Accepting the promised cup of tea, I wondered how soon I could decently go, and wondered *what publisher?*, and wondered *publishing what?*

"Such a blessing!" Merrill was saying. "She went very quickly, so Gordon says."

"He doesn't think it's such a blessing!" I said sharply. "He seems deeply grieved!"

"Yes, so he *seems*. Wouldn't you think he'd be—well, a bit more subtle?" Merrill gave a tinkling laugh. "When you heard Nora was dead—and so far away, too—did you not, for one *teensy* second, say to yourself, 'Lucky Gordon'?"

"'Lucky Gordon!'" I echoed, thoroughly shocked.

"Surely you know he gets Nora's money? Nora left it to him—can you imagine? She *told* him she was going to! 'You'll need it, Gordon,' she told him. *Heavens*, said I to myself, lucky lucky Merrill to have bought the River House before they left—he wouldn't have to sell it now!"

I set down my cup. "I really must be going—I—uh—I promised Vale I'd get Justin's list for the opening—"

"Take my advice and conveniently forget to include his friends from art school—a more tacky bunch I never saw. Oh, and don't forget—not a *word* about me! Or he might back out, even at the last minute. I just hope he doesn't put two and two together—that really was a *staggering* commission Vale got for handling the sale of old What's-his-name—Ishmael Carson—though I assure you, Emelie, I would have been quite willing to negotiate privately and save him that much, at least—"

"Israel," I said. "*Israel* Carson. Goodbye, Merrill. Thanks for the tea."

All the way to Ransom's Bridge there were sap buckets hanging like leeches from the maples.

That evening Justin stood sipping his coffee and contemplating the twilit terrace. "The moon is at the quarter," he remarked. "It'll be colder again."

"I had the door open all day," I said. "It was fifty out—would you believe it?"

"It's twenty now." He moved away from the window, to take his accustomed seat by the fire. He had brought my father's Aquinas with him, I saw.

I tucked my legs under me on the Belter sofa and tried to immerse myself in *Vanity Fair*, but tonight the book could not hold my attention. I kept thinking of Merrill's vicious innuendos about poor fat slobby Gordon, shaken

by his loss. Some one ought to *stop* her, I thought, but I couldn't even tell Justin, let alone ask his help. When he reviled her, it only showed what power she had over him still. Were I fool enough to add my criticisms to his, he would turn on me.

"There's no snow in Welkin," I said. "Or almost none."

"Good," he said, his eyes on his page.

"Vale wants to know if you want to do the show." That did make him look up. "She says you never let her know."

"No," he said slowly, after a moment. "I intended to—"

"But something put it out of your mind," I said. "The charming thank-you from Bard's parents, perhaps? Or perhaps you had a letter from a publisher?" Irrational tears stung my eyelids.

"I intended to tell you as soon as I had any definite word. They're still mulling over the one portfolio, waiting for divine guidance, I guess." I could feel his eyes on me, puzzled. "Why do you let it distress you so? I mentioned it to Vale only in order to justify my refusal to put the botanical studies up for sale."

"I'm being silly," I said. "I'm more wrought up than I—I thought. I ran into Gordon and he really is very shaken by Nora's death. I don't think he realized how much he cared for her."

"I believe that's often the case." For a long moment he regarded me thoughtfully, then went on with his reading. I could see his hand holding the volume, his hand turning the page. I knew every curve and plane of those fingers: I'd watched them break bread, wield knife and fork, grasp a steering wheel. What would it feel like if that hand should cup my breast? I'd read of such things—a lover, or a husband, will do that to his beloved. I tried to imagine what it would feel like if Justin's hand were to hold me, so, and my knees turned to water, and the silence in the room grew deafening.

"Would you like a brandy, Emelie?"

"Why—yes, thank you, I would," I said.

He rose, and returned with two glasses. Handing me mine, he went back to his book.

I changed my position so that I could watch the flames on the hearth. I was aware of Justin stretched out in his chair, his long legs propped on the stool, of his hands

turning the pages, the pages rustling like dry leaves . . . of his hands and his hard arms and his hard legs that had rendered me so helpless the one time . . . that one time he had helped himself, had taken what he wanted, angrily, hungrily, scornful of my timidity. I stared at the flames and I marveled at myself. Did I want more of that? There'd been no pleasure in it for me—only embarrassment, shock, shame, and disappointment. Yet a queer sort of pleasure in the weight of him, the strength of him . . . I stared at the flames, and I knew, reason or no, I desired him. What would he say if I said quite simply and openly, "Justin, take me to bed with you—"? Would he say, "*You are nothing to me—nothing—*"? . . .

I shifted my position again, and my book slipped to the floor. I let it lie. Yes, I wanted him to want me . . . I wanted his breath on my cheek, his hands gripping mine, his legs between mine, his body in my body in that 'sweetest linking of lovers' . . . I reached over very slowly and picked up my book. Then I slowly raised my eyes and let myself look at his face. His eyes were on his book; I could see beneath his thick lashes the black orbs moving, flicking quickly across the lines of print. The fire-light played on his cheekbones, and on his eyelids, and his brows were black hawkwings . . .

He looked up then. At once I looked down at the volume open on my lap, stared at the page without moving, without breathing. He put down his book and rose, and for a moment I thought in panic he was going to come across to me and . . . and . . . I didn't know what. But he went to the fire and poked it with the iron, and a shower of sparks flew up. "Are you going up soon, or would you like me to put on more wood?" he said.

"No—no, thank you, I think I'll go to bed."

"Good night, then," he said.

"Good night," I said, and almost stumbled in my haste to be gone, but I wanted to be in my room and the door shut before he should come up the stairs to his room.

I heard him come; I heard his door close. I was in bed, rigid, staring at the pale moon-patterns on the wall, when I heard his door open, and his step. There was the briefest of knocks; before I could reply he came in, he came directly across to my bed.

"Emelie," he said in a voice so gentle my heart turned

over, "my longing for you hasn't misled me?" and he touched my hair by my brow; his finger traveled the curve of my cheek. "You do want me here with you?" In the moonlight I could see his breath on the icy air. And all the while his hand light as a feather drifted down to my throat, down to my shoulder, where he commenced to unfasten my nightdress.

"Yes," I breathed. "Yes, oh yes—"

And then swiftly and surely *well at least he knows the path he's on* he drew my nightdress down over my feet, keeping me covered the while against the cold, and then he went round to the other side, tossed his robe toward the rocker, and slid between the sheets. I heard him catch his breath, and laugh.

"Good God," he said, "you lie in a cold bed, Mrs. St. John!"

"It's warmer where I am," I said.

"Yes, I know . . ." And he reached for me in the darkness.

It was so different from that other time . . . it was so entirely different. He was in no hurry, for one thing; he was not greedy, as if he feared something he craved would be snatched from him. And I . . . I felt as if I had been on a long, long journey and was nearing the end, and there was no danger here, nor shame, nor fear of failure, only safety: strength and warmth and unity and trust.

"Emelie," he whispered, and he kissed me, and his hand cradled my breast, and stroked the curve of my hip, and my body awoke. After a while, neither too soon nor too slow, I was entirely his.

As the waves of passion receded I felt spent, washed clean, made new—made entirely new, like a beach swept clean of debris: fears gone, loneliness gone, uncertainties, self-doubts, dread of what lay beyond tomorrow—gone: gone. This release, this freedom was all thanks to Justin: to his gentleness, to his patience, to his aggressive strength, to his manhood. As I gloried in the clean yet faintly musky smell of his skin, in the hard swell of the muscles of his shoulders and arms, in the sweetness of his breath as he buried his lips in my hair, the emotion I felt above all was gratitude. *Oh, Justin, I thought, thank you—thank you! We get so much more than we give—*

love is a glory! a wonder! All I had to do was want you . . . welcome you! I shall never ever again think I'm worthless, not worth wanting—never, never again! . . .

Joy rose in me, and a great wave of compassion. "Oh, Bard," I thought, in pity, and in farewell.

And realized, in rising horror, I had whispered the name aloud.

Fool! I pressed my hands to my mouth. What stammered explanation of mine could possibly wipe away my words? *Fool! Fool!*

Justin had caught up his robe. "It would be prudent of you, Emelie, if you must fantasize about one man while another makes love to you, if you could keep the fact to yourself!"

"Please," I implored. "Oh, please—"

"I feel like a bigamist!" He fairly spat the words. "I've been aware for some time I share this house with your first husband. I'll be damned if I'll share my bed! I could take you away from any man alive, I think, but I can't compete with a dead man. No man could!" He was at the door. He started to open it, then shut it again and turned once more. "Correction," he said, his voice shaking with rage. "I am not the bigamist here—you are! You might remember bigamy is a crime, defined, I believe, in the case of a woman, as the having of two husbands at once. This is a clear impossibility. If a woman cannot choose between two men, she does not have two husbands, she has none!"

The latch clicked and he was gone.

Chapter Thirty-four



The Justin who sat across from me the next morning was a stranger with no hint of laughter on his lips, no glint of interest in his eyes. If he rose as I entered, the gesture was for his self-respect only; if he was compelled

to speak to me at lunch—the butter, for example, lay at my hand—his tone was as if to a chance tablemate in a public eating place. And in the evening he took his coffee and disappeared into his studio; apparently he felt even the library too vulnerable to invasion.

April's full moon was on the eighth. Late in the month the new moon hung low in the west, a sliver of light against the clear green pool of the sky. As April yielded and May advanced, we had our last frosts, and the tamaracks edged the lake with lace. In the orchard the catbird boasted he'd wintered with a nightingale; below the terrace, the pear tree put on bridal white. And day by day the moon swelled, until round and majestic it rose as the sun was setting. And I thought, I'm three weeks late.

And I went into Welkin, and took out my copy of our marriage contract, and brought it home and burned it in my bedroom grate. And with that gesture I was no longer Emelie Carson Milne St. John, lonely, frightened, insecure, clutching at Tamarack as if without it I would be nothing. Suddenly (it seemed suddenly) I was *myself*, and it was a self I'd never known before.

For instance: that very evening at dinner when William said, "Grace says she can't understand why the soufflé collapsed, madam," I said with a smile, "Tell her never mind, it's that fiendish oven. And please, William—'Miss Emelie,' not 'madam'—I'm not 'madam'!" When Justin looked up at that, eyes narrowed, I said easily, "You know, ever since Clemmy was lost, I've been thinking we ought not to be so cut off from our neighbors. I do wish you would have that phone installed."

"I'll see to it at once," he said, and returned to his book.

The next morning I made bold to ask him to advise me about the removal of the portraits of Emelie Stark. "They poison that room," I said. "I can't go in for five minutes without feeling I'm about to be buried alive."

He said impersonally, "Shall we say four-thirty? I'll be through work by then."

Precisely at four-thirty I heard him come through the library and go up the curving stair. As I reached the Hogarth room I found him engaged in a leisurely tour of inspection. "No," he said at last, "your anonymous letter-writer was misinformed—or misled: you are none of

these; yet I think, in some measure, you are all of them. No wonder you find them unnerving, and want them down."

"How little you know me, Mr. St. John! I don't see myself in these damnable portraits—I see the cruelty of man to woman, of *life* to woman! What was her sin, after all? She responded in her loneliness to some passing male who for his own pleasure was kind to her—and as punishment she was tormented to death! Locked in here to be stared at by her own face—to hear her child crying for the wet nurse, not for her—to see him playing beneath these windows, never to be held by her, never to be rocked—" I thought of Clemmy in my arms, and my voice broke. Turning away abruptly, I said fiercely, "*Damn* Israel Carson! He didn't *own* her—he had no right to punish her! She was punished enough when her lover deserted her!"

"So you've decided he left of his own free will?"

"Didn't you suggest he may have fallen through the ice?"

Justin strolled to the window. "Or into the ice house," he said coolly. "If I were Israel, that's where I would have dumped him. Dead *or* alive, I mean. Generous in a way, don't you think, to let the adulteress keep watch over the tomb of her paramour?" At my gasp, he said with barely concealed contempt, "Oh? You don't think she yielded voluntarily?" When I was silent, "It's the one sin most husbands still find beyond forgiveness. And remember Israel Carson had to struggle along without all the psychological crap we have handy nowadays to plaster over wantonness and infidelity."

I said, my voice shaking, "Before a man can be betrayed, there has to be a marriage. Just because some—some *words* were spoken over them, that doesn't mean he ever felt for her as a husband ought!"

"And what feelings ought he to have had, that he did not?"

"Compassion," I said, "for her weakness."

He laughed. "Our timid kitten shows signs of turning into a tigress," he said, a curious glint in his eyes.

"I asked you here *only* to get your technical advice," I said icily. "Can these portraits be removed without com-

mitting murder? That's what you called it, I believe, when we destroy an artist's work."

He wrenched his eyes from my face and began to examine the framing. "This may be beyond William's and my combined talents," he said at last. "You'd better get an expert. There's a fellow at the Museum of Fine Arts who might come."

"Shall I write him, or would you prefer to?"

He said coldly, "It's hardly my place to do so, is it? However, I'm obliged to point out Mansfield may feel you've violating the terms of Martha's Will by selling these portraits."

"Have I said I would sell them? I simply want them out of the house. I will not live in a museum, surrounded by the griefs of the past!"

"Very commendable." He shrugged.

Within a week a backhoe had growled its way around the vegetable patch and through the maples to climb the east slope to the house. "There'll be no wires to be seen from the house or the lane," Justin told me. "They can be strung through the woods as far as the barn, and if you ever find your name is Vanastorbilt, you can have them buried all the way, but frankly I think it's not necessary. However, I am having a power cable put in at the same time—well below your phone line, naturally—in case you decide the solution to the 'fiendish' oven is an electrical one. This way you won't have to dig twice."

"But I don't *want* electricity!"

"You may come to it, in time. The Rowdons represent a species that is almost extinct, and they aren't immortal. I suggest you have an extension phone in the kitchen, in the library, and in your bedroom. I'll be off after the Gallery show, and I'll feel better if you are somewhat more linked to the twentieth century."

Where are you going and when are you coming back? I wanted to say. But those are questions only a wife has the right to ask, and whatever else I was, I was not—not truly—Justin's wife. It takes more than a marriage ceremony, I thought, more than the conceiving of a child. Nor would I plead, *But what of me . . . what of the child I'm carrying?* Because I wasn't going to tell him, not until I had to. "Love offered freely," he'd said once, so long ago, "is treasured above that for which one must beg."

I'm with child by you would be a form of begging, wouldn't it? The lowest form, the basest, for it could not be ignored, or refused.

Sometimes I would tease myself by imagining how it would be if Justin found out by accident. Perhaps I would faint, publicly somewhere, and someone—Vale, probably—would protest he had no right to drag me about in the heat, and he would be shocked and disbelieving . . . and awed, grateful, loving . . .

Oh, *bunk*, I thought bleakly. Romantic bilgewater.

Obviously no outside circumstance was going to enlighten him, for it seemed to me being pregnant agreed with me outrageously; except for a tendency to oversleep in the mornings, I couldn't remember ever feeling more full of zest. Whenever my mind wasn't playing variations on the Great Revelation scene, it was leaping from one plan to another, laying out in five minutes work which would take five weeks to accomplish: designing an herb garden; laying out a wildlings walk along the edge of the forest; redecorating the Hogarth room as—what? a studio for me, in case I did start my own furniture design business? Five weeks, did I say? Five months, more likely. Or five years!

May went swiftly, as it always does. The apple buds went from green to pink to white overnight, and everywhere the dandelions grew bolder. And one morning—it was Monday, the twenty-seventh, I remember, because it was the day Justin was to take his paintings to the Gallery—I borrowed William's clippers, and trimmed and pruned some snow-injured lilacs, working my way toward the clump by the ice house, where Pentacost's raw new door stood ajar on its heavy hinges. I was careful not to get too close, for I had a horror of the place ever since Justin had postulated Parsloe Rhys's death and/or burial therein. Restless and uneasy, I cut and cut until I had an armload of the heavy, heady-scented blossoms, and then I made my way down through the overgrown garden to the lake.

As I crossed the inlet, suddenly I was seized by the thought *if I were to see his body drifting in the blackness under the ice . . . turning slowly, one hand trailing, helplessly among the weeds . . . I know which Emelie I would be. Here I go again*, I thought in panic, and I looked about

for the heron. In the soft earth the sharp two-part tracks of deer marked their path to the water, but no sign of the great bird could I see anywhere.

I hurried on and turned in past the sagging gate, to go directly over to Gam.

I wasn't sure which way she lay, so I put the lilacs by her hand. "Hello, Gam darling," I said very softly, and I looked around, but we were alone: the pale shimmer of new leaves hung motionless in the bright air. "I've something to tell you—" and I looked round again.

There before Emelie Stark's stone lay the heron, its sleek wild beauty reduced to a rumpled heap of feathers. The wings, nearly intact, were spread impotently against the earth, its long legs though unbroken were limp and ungainly, its smoothly curving neck still unassaulted; only the body was ravaged, the bloody cavity obscenely alive with scavenging beetles. As I stared at the paw marks left so arrogantly in the mud, I realized the graveyard was no longer safe. Death had trespassed here—death raw and untamed had laughed at this 'holy place', where the journey from this world to the next was designed to be decent and orderly, named and dated in granite, encased in bronze.

Justin had taken William down from over the dining room mantel, and the two Pentacosts, Mrs. Grimes, Ken, the stone boat owner, and the Rowdons were all lined along the hall, waiting to go; the botanicals, matted and framed, were already in the Audi. "Would you mind to step aside?" he said, as if I were a stranger, a passer-by who, seeing the door open, had blundered in.

"Sorry." I moved to sit out of the way on the stairs. He glanced at me. "Are you all right?"

"Just fine, thank you."

He was by the door, as if anxious to be gone, yet vaguely troubled by something he couldn't quite put his finger on. Had he ever asked himself if twice was once too many? No, I'd given him no reason to, I thought with pardonable complacency.

"You look pale."

Did I? God knows I was justified—*Justinified*, I thought, and suppressed a gasp of nervous laughter. "I took some lilacs to Gam."

"And ran into a ghost or two on the way?"

"Of course not. Don't you remember Pentacost says it's after sunset that Israel goes down with his candle—he'd hardly need it in bright daylight, would he?"

"So that's to be your line now, is it? The child is irritatingly silent since I moved across the hall, so now Israel Carson walks at dusk?"

"I told you, I didn't see him," I said calmly. "I've only really seen him the once."

"My dear Emelie, don't put yourself to any further trouble. You can't conceive how little I care if the entire population of the Carson graveyard chooses to move in here with you! I'm sure you'll have no difficulty in making them feel at home. But convey my cordial excuses, will you? As soon as this damned show opens, I'm leaving. I only wish to God I hadn't promised Vale I'd be there!"

I didn't tell him I'd found the heron dead. I didn't think he'd care.

On Memorial Day—that is, the thirtieth of May, the day the fallen expect us—I took an armload of lilac from the thicket by the ice house and some I put on Elizabeth Stearns's sons' graves, and some I put on my grandfather's, for surely he had earned a soldier's tribute, too.

The phone was ringing as I crossed the terrace.

"I'll take it!" I hurried into the library. It was Vale: did Justin want to come and okay how she'd hung things?

"I really don't know," I said. "He's plunged back into his save-the-endangered studies—I hardly ever see him—" I laughed lightly. "I'll try to persuade him, but I can't promise."

"Just between us, it's only a courtesy gesture," she said. "I hate to come on all 'Mama knows best,' but frankly, when it comes to placement, I *do* think I do."

I couldn't resist: I said, "Vale, what do you *think*?"

She laughed. "My dear, they are every bit as good as you suspect! Saturday will be *your* day, too, my pet—you'll find it great fun to bask in reflected glory! Now, do you happen to have H, McD and B's phone number? They're sending a very *sub-sub*-editor to gauge the painter's potential, for which read 'sales appeal,' and want to make sure he or she is properly met."

"One moment." I searched through the sift of papers in the top drawer. "Would it be among his unanswered

letters, do you suppose?" And I slipped the rubber band from a packet marked 'Deal with These.' "Yes—here it is—"

"A thousand thanks. One more favor—get him here by three-thirty, pet—at four the mob pours in!"

"He'll be there," I said shakily, and hung up.

Justin had filed the letter from Bard's parents in with the 'Deal with These,' and the letter, I now realized—for the contents had spilled out on the desk—had included a Xeroxed copy of Bard's suicide note. I had never read it, of course. *To my mother and father and nobody else*, Bard had scrawled across the seal, and I hadn't opened it, though I had had plenty of time, before anybody came . . . before the Dean came, or the campus police.

I folded the letter from Hotchkiss, McDougal and Bligh, scrupulously refusing to read *that*, at least, though a phrase or two had leapt out at me: ". . . needs an artist with an established following . . ." Poor Justin! Well, that didn't concern me—I was nothing to him; I didn't even have the right to share his disappointments—but what Bard's parents said to him *was* my concern, wasn't it? For my child's sake, I had a right to know what poison they'd slipped into his mind, didn't I? Guiltily, I went over and closed the sliding doors to the south parlor, and then I closed the door to the hall. And then I sat down gingerly on the edge of the desk chair, and I picked up the stiff cream-colored notepaper, and (guiltily) I read:

My dear Mr. St. John:

How very thoughtful of you to send our son's sketches which turned up in such *peculiar* circumstances. Of course we will treasure them, in spite of *who* they are of, as we treasure everything of our beloved son's.

We received the clipping of your marriage, but did not acknowledge it at the time. We see now you were moved by the thought we would be interested in what becomes of her, and to a degree that is true. We wish we could find it in our hearts to hope she will be happy, and must confess we do not share your confidence, for reasons which the enclosed copy of our son's last words to us may make clear. Perhaps you are sufficiently older

and more experienced, and will not, therefore, be so easily victimized.

With cordial best wishes,
Anne Milne
(Mrs. Bardwell Milne, Senior)

I was truly glad I was sitting down. I supposed I need have no scruples about reading Bard's suicide note . . . If they could practically make it public, sending a copy to my husband, no doubt they *wanted* me to read it . . . I smoothed flat the last words of Bardwell Milne, Junior (he never told he was 'Junior') and I read:

"Sorry about all this, but I'm sick of everything. I'm sick of getting up and going to class and coming back here and going to bed. I'm sick of thinking what people are thinking. Of what you're thinking. You're ashamed of me, you always were. I've failed at everything I've ever tried to do. I couldn't make the ski team, I was always wiping out. I panicked when I had to walk that log, remember? And all the parents watching. It took me three tries to get my goddam driver's license, and at graduation I lost the music I was supposed to sing. Everybody thought it so goddam hilarious.

"You never wanted me to be a painter. This should make you happy, because I can't paint. I try and I try and it always is wrong, always just off. I feel like screaming at Emelie when I watch her stammering, lying, trying to say it's good when she knows and I know it's a lousy failure. How can I love her? She sits there smiling that fake smile of hers and says, '*I know it will come right for you, Bard darling!*' She *knows* it will all come wrong, and so do I, and I'm not her goddam *darling*, and I never was.

"You can tell her I didn't dare try to make love to her because I knew it would all go wrong and she would smile and lie and tell me it was just fantastic, and all the while she would despise me, and I would hate her so goddam much for her lies and her pretending that I would kill her, I think. Choke off that goddam fake smile. Big joke—this is a failure, too. I'm killing me because I don't have the guts to kill her. Fake fuck fink . . ."

* * *

I sat there, my thoughts spilling like a pack of cards. *What a fool*, I thought (that was topmost). And: *But I wasn't worth it*. And: *What did they do to him that maimed him so? Or did he maim himself, and it wasn't their fault?* And then—and of this I was truly ashamed, as if of all the cards I preferred the joker—*Dear God, it's almost funny! How on earth could he remember all those ridiculous 'failures,' and list them, at such a time?*

Poor Bard.

As I folded the sheets of notepaper and put them back in the envelope, tapped the letters into alignment, and slipped the rubber band around them, I had the curious sensation that I was putting Bardwell Milne, Junior into a new category: File and Forget. I had loved him once, when I hadn't really known him. Now that I knew him, I could no longer love him. He was safely dead; I had the living to think of.

I have the living to think of . . . Oh God, don't let me do that to my son. Let me love him . . . truly love him, then safely turn him free to be a man.

As I expected, Justin didn't care to check on the positioning of his paintings. "I leave that to Vale," he shrugged.

I said nothing about the letter from Bard's parents.

Finally it was Saturday and finally it was afternoon. We reached Welkin about quarter to four.

The door stood wide. Facing us in what must be the place of honor—certainly it was the first thing anyone would set eyes on—was Merrill, full-length and framed in gilt. She was posed by a table, apparently arranging a bowl of yellow tulips, and her eyes gazed out at the viewer in serene self-confidence, so radiantly sure of her beauty was she.

"Thank Heaven you're here!" Vale cried, her hands outstretched. "*Dahlings*, whatever's wrong? You're both pale as death!"

Women in Yellow, I read, and the year, and *on loan from the collection of Dixon Mansfield*.

At that moment Merrill, bearing two wine glasses, swept round the partition. "Hello, *dahlings*—" it must be a tribal inflection, I thought distractedly—"do drink a toast to my courage! Vale thought it would be—well, *interesting*

—to compare your technique, Justin—or should I call it your approach?—of a dozen years ago with what you have today.” When he made no move to accept the glass she offered, “To the past!” she said, and sipped. Her eyes smiled a challenge at me. “Well? Would you say he’s lost anything?”

She had been sufficiently daring to wear the same gown of smoky yellow chiffon in which he’d painted her. And she was just as beautiful . . . More so, if anything. I gazed at the portrait as if bewitched. That arrogant assurance she was worth any price it cost a man to have her: had he agreed? And its depiction—was that censure, or tribute?

“I can’t take credit,” Vale said, an edge to her voice. “It was entirely your idea, Merrill, though I agree it’s a bold gesture. But it comes off, don’t you think, Justin? Even though you’ve grown so fantastically, yet it’s all there already—you really get under her skin—”

“You mean I get under his,” Merrill said with a tinkling laugh. “I can’t take all the credit, either—it wouldn’t be fair!” She shot me an admiring glance. “Honestly, didn’t you breathe a single word? Darling Emelie, I never *dreamed* anyone could keep a secret so well!”

I still couldn’t trust myself to speak. As for Justin, he said nothing, not a word, but turned and walked slowly past the other paintings—William, grave and honest, Grace, honest and grave, Pentacost, naive yet cunning, Mrs. Grimes the Widow of Bath, Ken Kendall the Town Crier, the stone-boat owner, stolid as an ox. Turning to Vale, he said, “The botanicals stay not for sale. You can raffle off the rest for all I give a damn.” He flicked a glance at me. “Coming, Emelie?”

“Coming,” I said, and followed him out. We passed Dixon Mansfield standing before the Merrill; he didn’t see us. Mrs. Grimes was heaving herself up the walk; she beamed. Justin held open the door to the Audi. I got in. We drove off.

He began his interrogation even before we were out of town.

“How long have you known Merrill was behind the show?”

“I—I wouldn’t say she was *behind* it—”

"Was connected with it. Had anything to do with it." Savagely.

"Since—since December." I drew a deep breath. "She asked me not to say anything—maybe it wouldn't work out and you'd be disappointed, and besides, if you knew she was connected with it, *you* wouldn't have anything to do with it. I remembered you'd once said a show at the Gallery would help your career—"

"I never said anything of the sort. I said I thought it might help get the botanical drawings published. The last thing I want is a damned 'career'—I thought you knew that! I thought you despised Merrill's creed, that a man can be defined only in terms of the money he makes—his name, his reputation, even his skill at making love, these are nothing but an extension of his check book. What else did she say? Did she give you a few tips on how to manage your marriage? Counsel you to check me out to see if I shared your first husband's inhibitions? She could have told you I didn't—"

"You can stop right there! *I* didn't discuss you, *she* did! I have too much pride to discuss you with anybody! Though from what she said, I thought she was really being v-very decent—"

"What the *hell* do you mean by that?"

"Since she didn't divorce you, you divorced her—"

"Did you ask her why?"

"Of course not! She—she told me anyway. Frankly, I didn't believe her."

"The reason didn't strike you as adequate?"

"Of course not," I said wretchedly, staring out at the radiant world, at the willows like plumes along the meadow brooks, every orchard flowering chintz, every hillside watered silk.

"Just what *would* you call adequate, I wonder? Or didn't she use my word for it? Didn't she call it murder?"

"What—what are you talking about?" I stammered.

"I'm talking about the fact that she murdered our child."

I stared at him in utter disbelief. *Let's talk heart to heart*, he'd said, and never told me he'd had a child.

"I don't believe you! She *loves* you—she wants you back! She said you divorced her because she didn't inherit Tamarack!"

"For God's sake what kind of a reason is that?" he said savagely. "Just this once why don't you listen to my side of it?"

We were off the blacktop now, and approaching Ransom's Bridge; to my relief, he drove more slowly.

"We were married when we were twenty-one. She had a little money, and she wanted more. Much more. She didn't want me to 'waste my time painting'—her phrase. I said, because I loved her, and because, too, I knew what lack of money could mean—I'd had a refresher course during my mother's illness—I said very well, for seven years I'd make money, and then I'd paint. I was being Biblical, I guess. It was to be a—God knows what, a bargain, I suppose—I seem to have the habit." He gave a bark of laughter. "For four years or so I did well enough—I told you, anybody could in those days. And then Merrill became pregnant, though she didn't tell me. No doubt you will think me a complete fool, but I had no idea she never intended to have children. They might spoil her figure; they would clutter her life—destroy the symmetry, or some such garbage. How she must have laughed at me when I tried to console her, as the years passed and she hadn't conceived. I was so conceited, you see, it never occurred to me she wouldn't want my child. Well, I was wrong."

I wrenched my eyes from his face and stared down into the woods, into the ravine. *She's not worth it.* . . . But that's a lesson we each of us must learn alone.

"So when, as such things happen, she found herself pregnant," he said roughly, "she had the child destroyed. I don't know what you call it, but when there is no earthly reason for such a step other than vanity and laziness and sheer, all-consuming egotism, I call it murder. 'She loves me,' you say. She loved me so much, she destroyed my seed!"

He loves her he loves her yet he loves her still . . .

"So I divorced her," he went on more easily, "not, as you would so rightly point out, the act of a gentleman. And then—" he grinned savagely—"because I am exceedingly superstitious, I carried out my side of the bargain. I stayed in the market for another three years, and because it didn't matter to me in the least, everything I touched made money. Seven years to the day, I quit, and

took my holdings to a management firm, very proper, very sound—in Boston, where else?—and told them to conserve my capital and send me the income, but not to bother me with details; what I don't spend they can reinvest, I said. And I took my paints, and having bought my freedom—the only real capital any man has, Emelie: the years of my life—and with me the sole owner, with full title, without lien or mortgage—I began to paint *as I wanted*, when I wanted, where I wanted, *what I wanted*. And then—”

We were at the turn of the lane. He swerved close to the mail box, braked, yanked it open, slammed it shut. “Nothing. The bills are late,” he said, and laughed that brief, mirthless laugh.

I said incredulously, “You mean you paid for everything—all the repairs and improvements—without touching your capital?”

He shot me a sardonic glance. “You and Merrill cling to the same financial creed, I see. Except that in her case anything she can lay her hands on becomes her own capital, and hence untouchable—I can't believe she *gave* that painting to Dixon. While she was married to me her income consisted of the duties she levied when she bartered her embraces. Oh, she wasn't that brazen about it, and I was too young to realize what she was up to. ‘*Dahling*, such a charming necklace I saw—’ and when *Dahling* bought it for her, ‘What *can* I do to say a *real* thank-you?’” He was silent a moment. Then: “It ought to be in the vows, I think. No profiteering.”

We were stopped below the steps to the north door. The scent of the apple blossoms was overpoweringly sweet.

“Well, you know me better now, don't you? We're two of a kind, all right. We each of us shucked off the mate we found intolerable, didn't we? And you're fully as ruthless as I am when wounded.” When I stared at him in bewilderment: “Spare me your look of injured innocence. No one could hope to top today's knock-out punch. God, how naive I was, preening myself that the Gallery was giving me a one-man show, and all the time it was my purchase of Israel—and the handsome percentage that little deal netted Vale—that shored up the whole project! But why am I surprised? Don't I know a man is nothing but a

walking bank account? God pity all the guys who get fired, and find their potency depended on their pay check!" He laughed harshly.

"I'm not trying to get back at you about anything," I said in a low voice. "And when I married you I thought you *were* nearly penniless—"

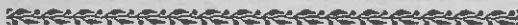
"Merrill's not in love with me, Emelie," he went on, for all the world as if I hadn't spoken; perhaps he hadn't heard me. "She never was in love with me. All she would have had to do was keep up her mask another three years—it would have been worth the investment, or so she must feel now. As for the child, what would it have cost her? I'd have been able to furnish nurses and governesses—she wouldn't have had to wipe its bottom once. If she'd done her part, if she'd been my wife, perhaps she would have been mistress of Tamarack now, instead of you."

As you wish she were . . .

I fumbled for the handle of the door, slid from the car, ran, stumbling, up the steps and into Tamarack.

Where I was still mistress. Instead of her. *Instead of her.*

Chapter Thirty-five



When I came in for breakfast Sunday morning, Justin's bedding roll, folding easel, canvas sack, paint box, and suitcase were by the north door in the hall. I'd been up since daybreak; huddled in my coat, I'd sat on the terrace and watched the deer come down to the lake. As the daylight strengthened and the chill burned off, I'd gone into the kitchen and fixed myself a cup of tea, and then I'd gone back out again. And so, after innumerable false starts and a truly wrenching mental effort, I had composed the note of some seven or eight lines that I concealed in my hand as I passed the dining room door and, safely out of his line of sight, slipped into his paint box.

When he lifted the lid to lay out his colors, he would be alone in the unspoiled world he loved. A faint breeze might stir the leaves, light and shade would dapple his face. He would read my note. It would bring him home, I knew it would, even though I still did not mention the child. I was determined not to hold him that way: a child, I thought bleakly, should be a link, not a fetter.

My note stated plainly and simply what was in my heart:

"You said that if a man's wife loves him and he doesn't know it, she should tell him. So I am telling you: I love you. I don't know when this began; I do know that with me this is for always, as long as life lasts.

"About that other: I was saying goodbye to a ghost that haunted me but haunts me no longer. You freed me from my grief when you freed me from my guilt.

"P.S. I shall be glad when you come home."

I went back to the dining room and took my place at the table. "Just toast and tea, William," I said.

Justin was ticking off items on a list. He didn't look up. "You might put my gear in the car when you have a moment, William." When we were alone, he allowed his eyes to meet mine; his expression was remote. "I've put my things in that room you call my studio, and I'm leaving it locked, which should ensure that nothing is tampered with while I'm away. If anything happens to warrant it—I can't imagine what, but one must always consider every contingency—you can reach me through my lawyers."

I said, "Are you sure you locked every way in? The door from that little front parlor? From the twisty stairs? The door through from the library? And what about the windows?"

"I was quite thorough. I thought you would be relieved—pleased, actually—to have me beat a strategic retreat."

"Oh, come now, Mr. St. John, be honest, at least," I said, my voice shaking. "The thought of *pleasing* me never crossed your mind! To lock me out of any room whatsoever in my own house, and on the grounds that your belongings aren't *safe* if I have access to them—that's what you were saying, isn't it?" We stared at each other. We couldn't be more cut off, I thought, if an inch-thick sheet

of glass had dropped between us. "You say you've thought of every contingency—I would question that," I said. "What would you have me do if we should have a fire? I couldn't get in there to rescue your precious books, or your number two Pentacost, or that demon Israel. And where would you have me put any unsold canvases when the show closes—not to mention the botanicals?"

He stood up, and thrusting his hand into his pocket, he brought forth his key ring, from which he selected one. "I daresay you'd have the locksmith here tomorrow," he said contemptuously. "Allow me to spare you the trouble and expense." He tossed the key onto the table.

A few moments later I heard the Audi start down the drive, and I had to accept that he had left without saying goodbye—or giving me a chance to. What would have happened, I thought then, or would *not* have happened—what bitter words would *not* have been exchanged—if I, instead of writing my avowal of love, had found the courage—the love—to have spoken those words aloud? Had found the courage to make him a gift of myself, as Gam had made me a gift of Tamarack—no, made him a *true* gift of myself, without lien or stipulation.

On Monday the mail brought a note from Joe and Sydney not to look for them at the opening Saturday, but they'd surely be up before the show ended. Thank God they hadn't been here, I thought, to witness Justin's discomfiture (my word) humiliation (his).

It was late that afternoon when Vale phoned. The Gallery had been packed since it opened, she reported, and three of the portraits were sold—the stone boat owner, Ken Kendall, the Mrs. Grimes. I had flown to answer the phone—*he's read my note! he's calling! he's coming!*—and no doubt my disappointment carried clearly over the line. "My pet, but three is *wonderful*—I mean these are paid for, full price, no dickering! And that dear sweet lad from Montreal is mad about the Pentacost but isn't sure he can afford it and will let me know. And Dixon Mansfield *of all people* wants a few days to consider the Rowdons as a pair!"

"I'm delighted you're delighted," I said.

"Yes, well—Dixon *did* say he rather hoped Justin might 'trim his sails a trifle' for the *two*—they ought to stay to-

gether, don't you agree? said he, and oh yes, I said fervently—but I could also see his point. Both would come to quite a whopping sum. Let me talk to that devastating man of yours for a moment, love."

"I don't know where he is, Vale," I said. "This morning he packed up his painting gear and drove off into the wild blue yonder."

Somehow this didn't come out as lightly as I intended, for there was a little pause, and then Vale said, "Darling—" in a voice she hadn't used with me before. It reminded me of my mother, and I couldn't speak.

"Emelie?" Vale said. "He *adores* you, Emelie. You know that, don't you? He absolutely *adores* you."

"S-sometimes I wonder," I said, and eased my breath in and out carefully, so she wouldn't know I was crying.

"Oh, my dear child, don't we all?" Vale said. "I'm terribly sorry, Emelie. I couldn't get out of it."

"I know," I said.

When I'd hung up I mopped my face and wiped the desk where my tears had splashed. I was no longer so sure I was much good at being pregnant—it seemed to me one way or another my dignity was rapidly dissolving.

The next morning the phone rang about eleven and (would I never learn?) when I raced to answer it, it was the expert from the Museum of Fine Arts. He was in Welkin and would like directions. I said I would personally guide him from there to here, and described the Landrover and myself, and set out at once. By noon he and his assistant, an intense, silent girl with owl-rim glasses and a mop of brown hair like steel wool, had been conducted to the Emelie Stark room, where they moved trancelike from one portrait to another, obviously shaken.

"You've had them appraised, of course?" he said, as she unleashed her camera and began recording the paintings *in situ*.

"There's no one in this area competent to do so. I'll expect you to have it done without delay, preferably by someone acceptable to the IRS, in case I decide to donate rather than lend them to the Museum." Mrs. Vanastorbilt speaking, I thought. "Bill it to me, of course," I added carelessly.

"Indeed, that won't be necessary! We *insist* on bearing all the expense!" If he had rubbed his hands he couldn't

have been more unctuous, I thought, and found, to my disgust, that I rather liked it. A woman is her checkbook too, I thought.

They started methodically with the first painting, the bland and innocent Emelie between the windows on the south wall. Each portrait, he told me, was painted on a single pine board—thirty-inch boards were common then, he said (in case I didn't know.). The boards had been set directly into the wall without chamfering, held in place by fully rabbeted moldings. I see, I said. The main problem was to remove this molding without damage, or perhaps I wasn't planning to reuse it?

"Of course I should like to," I said, "when we replace the panels. We can't very well leave the room as it is."

They appeared to be professionally competent. He handled his chisel and mallet with delicacy and skill; she seemed knowledgeable about protecting the panels for shipment, wrapping each in white sheeting and then taping the swathed painting against a fiberboard backing.

"What's that for, like a splint?"

"Yeah." It was the only word I heard her speak all day.

From where I was perched on the sill of a west window, I had an excellent view of the last terrible portraits . . . too excellent a view. Deliberately, I turned away and gazed out at the radiant world below, at the ash trees, a lacework of fresh green above the ice house, at the raspberry bushes, their arching branches spangled with bright green, at the lilacs, still lavender-clustered. Everything looked so sane, so clean, so normal—surely there was nothing in there behind Pentacost's extravagantly substantial door, sawdust-insulated, ornately hinged, glossily varnished and securely barred . . . nothing in there that ought not to be . . .

"Mrs. St. John, did you get to see that first Rhys that turned up hereabouts?" He had two down, and was working on that one where she looks like springtime. "It was among the exhibits in a show sponsored by your Historical Society, I believe."

"Oh, yes, I saw it," I said.

"Around Thanksgiving, wasn't it? I had the foul luck to be away that week. By the time I heard of it, it'd disappeared into someone's private collection. Tell me, how

did it compare to these?" And he gestured towards the Emelie Radiant.

"Much more vitriolic," I said. "More like those last two." I didn't look at them.

"Fascinating." He sighed. "You wouldn't have any idea where it is now, would you?"

"It's in this house. My husband bought it. But I'm afraid without his permission I couldn't possibly lend it also."

He was staring at me as if I had casually opened a door on a closet full of gold bullion. "Here? In this—I mean, *here*?" He swallowed hard. "Might I—could we see it? Perhaps take a photograph?"

"Certainly," I said, and thanked my foresightedness in bluffing a key from Justin. "I'll bring it here."

I went gracefully out of the room—Mrs. Vanastorbilt again—and sailed down to the library, retrieved the key from the Chippendale desk, and unlocked the door to his studio.

The room looked as if someone had died. Across his Morris chair—correction, *the* Morris chair—were draped whatever suits and jackets he hadn't taken with him. A jar of winter twigs had toppled over by the hearth—fortunately, there'd been no water in it—and his books were in three teetery piles on the floor. Obviously he had packed in a tearing hurry—or tearing rage. He'd gone through the house and gathered up everything he owned and dumped it in here, and locked all the doors, and would have denied me a key, if he could. There was no sign of the tamaracks sculpture. I wondered if he'd burned it . . . No, he wouldn't do that. Probably packed it away somewhere, where he wouldn't have to see it.

I lifted down the Israel Carson. It was heavier than I expected—the frame alone was nearly three inches deep—and for a moment I was almost pushed off balance. Anxious to be free of this desolate room, I hurried to the door, locked it behind me, and pocketed the key. Up the curving stair I went and along to the Emelie Stark room, where Mr. Expert leaped to relieve me of my burden.

"He belongs on the mantel," I said.

As the owl-eyed girl clicked her camera from varying distances and angles, Israel Carson glared down in impatient disapproval. I resumed my position by the window, but

felt increasingly uneasy and uncomfortable . . . cold, actually, as if I had caught a chill. "If you need me, I'll be in the garden," I said at last, and went down to the terrace, and soaked up sunshine, and gradually my shivering ceased. It had been a mistake to move the Israel, to hold the portrait in my arms, to be so near. No use to say it was nothing but pigment smeared on a pine board. Something of Israel Carson was in that portrait . . . something of his Emelie was in hers. Crosscurrents between the two were as dangerous as the trajectories of bullets: the very air of the room had vibrated with them.

Well before three o'clock the Fine Arts experts were done. "We're eternally grateful to you for your generosity, Mrs. St. John," he said happily as he stowed the last painting into the station wagon. He climbed behind the wheel. "Thanks again!" His assistant shifted her gum and nodded. I waved them off.

I was reluctant to return to the house . . . to the west wing, where I had (so to speak) turned Israel loose. Whatever had possessed me to be so gracious and obliging? The thing to do was to get that portrait back where it belonged, and at once. I could always ask William to move it. Perhaps it wasn't even good for me, to carry such a weight such a distance . . . Nonsense, it wasn't that heavy. Oh, what on earth was I making so much of it for?

I went back to the Emelie Stark room, now disfigured by six great scars in the walls—six huge eye sockets staring back at the smoldering gaze of Israel Carson on the mantel. I went directly across, stepped lightly on the hearth, and lifted him down.

I must have been in too much of a hurry, too anxious to be done, because somehow again I lost my balance—almost lost it—stepped back hastily to keep from being toppled backwards—and dropped the portrait on the hearth. It caught on a corner of the frame, and a thin and fragile board that was part of the backing broke loose.

I knelt to examine the damage. Dear God, couldn't I come near *anything* of Justin's without destroying it? Through the gap I could see some kind of cloth. Cautiously I felt about . . . It was some kind of coarsely woven stuff, inside of which there was something more . . . something solid.

It was a journal. I laid aside the napkin in which it was wrapped, and gently, reverently, turned back the cover; the leather crackled faintly. The paper on which the faded script was so carefully, lovingly, beautifully inscribed was, though somewhat brittle, yet still firm. They built their houses and they made their paper to last, in those days, I thought, and turned to the first page.

October 2, 1819

It is eleven o'clock in the morning, the world is wrapped in stillness, and I am alone . . .

I glanced up. Israel Carson's eyes glittered into mine; his mouth was a whiplash.

1819. She had married him that year. This must be Emelie's, then—Emelie Stark's journal, the story of her heart's journey, her son's birth, her lover's death. It was not for Israel Carson's eyes!

Hastily, I closed the cover and put the journal on the mantel. Then, picking up the portrait, taking care not to catch myself on the splintered back, I carried him, face away from me, down and across to the library, where I unlocked the door, carried him in and propped him against Justin's work desk, then shut and relocked the door.

I went back and collected Emelie Stark's Journal, stopping by the kitchen to tell Grace I was going to visit Gam's grave, and if anybody called—if Mr. St. John should happen to phone—I'd be back up surely by supertime. Then I went down the slope, past the inlet, past the silent empty tamaracks, in through the sagging gate and over to Emelie's grave. There was no trace of the heron.

"I found your Journal, Emelie Stark," I said. "Gam said it doesn't do for things to be forgotten. What happens to us shouldn't die with us, she said. So if it's all right with you, I'd like to read it. I'd like to know you."

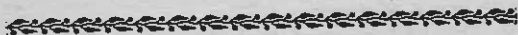
Somewhere a bird called once, an impertinent sound like a street cry, and in the distance a windy rustling threatened rain. Here where the worn stones straggled over the uneven ground—decently mounded, as over Gam, her sturdy bronze box shoring up the soil, sunken oblongs before the older markers—the grasses, the ferns, the heavy canopy of the maples drew down the thickening mist and shivered into silence.

I turned back to cover once again, smoothed open the first page, and commenced to read.

October 2, 1819

... *I am alone* ...

Chapter Thirty-six



*May (I believe) in the
year of my Lord 1822*

For a year and a half I have writ nothing in my Journal, and this neglect is cowardly, I see now. I must put down what I can, so that my son, should he some day peruse these pages, will know something of me, his mother, of my love for him which has been denied him, of my love for his father which was denied me.

I thank God I did not yield to the temptation to burn my Journal, for this would have denied me its comfort those many, many months when I had only my own countenance for company—my visage staring at me from every wall, as if this room were possessed of a Mirror Devil, confronting me with myself Stupid, myself Blank of Mind, myself Flirtatious, myself Wantonly Happy, myself Despairing, myself Abandoned to Grief. It was a singularly successful punishment on the part of my husband, for I grew to loathe my face exceedingly, and would contrive to look only out the windows, into the fire, or at my Journal—and my pages would restore me to sanity: once again I would believe that the world doth still exist beyond the confines of Tamarack.

It is my hope that by the grace of a compassionate and all-merciful God these my words will come into the hands of my son, and for him will be marks blazed through the forest, to lead him to my people—to my father, if yet he lives, or to *his* father's people, of whom I know nothing. My love and I had almost no chance for talking, and

of course there was so much else we would have talked about, than, Where was he born? Had he brothers and sisters? Where learned he his trade? Had we had the chance to talk, I mean, while our hearts were whole. Later we had no wish for such congress of mere acquaintanceship, but could only say (aloud or silently) *oh, my love my love.*

It was my intention to tell our son of those months when he, the embodiment of my love's love, lay within my womb, our blood joined as our souls were also . . . but when I look back now at the anguish I felt then: my grief, my loneliness, above all my dread that the child I carried might not be my dear love's, but was again the teeming seed of my husband, I view those months as a purgatory I ought not to impose on the innocent cause. And then my dear son chose to come some three weeks early, and that in itself frightened me . . . but I see I am telling all in a jumbled heap.

All that December I knelt by the window, and watched first over his father's prison and then over his tomb, and never knew when the one evolved into the other, so could not pray for his soul's passing. Nor could I rejoice at the first hint I might have a harvest from our rash trespass of love, for I did not know whose was the crop.

Except for Mrs. Ransom, who brings me my meal at midday, empties the chamberpot and carries away changes of linen, I have seen no one except my husband. Once I tried to tell Mrs. R about the murder, but she would not listen, saying hurriedly, "I dassn't heed a word you say, he's told me to pay you no mind—" and casting an uneasy glance at the multiple Mistress Carsons (as if she sensed something here of malevolence inappropriate to a doting husband) she hastened from my chamber. From the first her fear has been apparent—she always enters warily, as if I might somehow strike her down—and my immoderate grief and wild lamenting did naught, I belatedly realized, to convince her I am as sane as she . . . saner, without a doubt, or else my mind would indeed give way under the provocation of my husband's attentions.

Which were not—I did then and do now most fervently give thanks!—were not *physical*. That at least I have not had to endure! Since he told one and all (so he informed me) my mind had given way under the strain

of my pregnancy and approaching confinement, that I was dangerous to all except myself—possibly even to myself: he was grieved to foresee the wisdom of nailing shut my window sash—with me his wife in so pitiful a state of mental collapse, obviously he could not approach me in any connubial way . . . or at any rate he did not wish to do so, I assume, otherwise he most certainly *would*. From this I conclude he views me as a veritable Whore of Babylon.

There was no need to nail the windows shut—did he think I would fling myself down, to terrify Constance by so gruesome a demise? Or rip my clothing and tie the rags in a rope and climb down? To run where? He would corral me like a fugitive sheep.

"I have forbid the child to come any nearer this room than her own bedchamber," said Mr. Carson. "She is not to use the back stairs, she is not to come into the hallway here—I will not have you disturb her childish mind with your demented accusations. Save your breath and cease your screaming, it is useless—it only distresses those who must work here, to be forced to listen to the uncontrolled excesses of my mad wife."

So when at last I knew my love must be dead, I ceased my screaming—what mattered anything now?—and sometimes I wept, and sometimes I paced back and forth across my chamber like a caged thing (which I was! I was!) and sometimes I looked down to the lake, across to the burial ground where first I had seen him—down to the terrace where I had sat whilst he had been painting Mr. Carson's likeness. And the weeks of winter crept past, and of spring. And Mr. Carson made me a present.

"I did promise you to paper this chamber in the French manner," said he. "The purchase I commanded came around Christmastide, but I found it offensively frivolous; it would only mock you in your present state to be forced to gaze on frolicking cupids. By good fortune a notice was brought to my attention—a Boston importer of British goods—"

In short, my husband had purchased for my chamber a set of Mr. Hogarth's cartoons—a sequence of six, entitled, Mr. Carson was pleased to tell me, 'The Harlot's Progress'. Each panel he has neatly mounted and framed, and the frames he has fastened to the wall, covering my

face. As if I were being buried six times, I thought, watching him work. And much as I abhorred my expression, in those where I grieved, yet when all were out of sight I grieved the more, for there is nothing now anywhere which I can see which was my love's. It is as if he had never been.

And then—a lifetime later—an eternity later—it was summer, it was the first of August, Lammas Day, when (were there anyone in this house who truly believed in God) the corn crop ought to be blessed, and my pains began. It was three weeks too soon, and I, despairing, thought I was indeed about to bring forth the fruit of Mr. Carson's sowing.

They say a woman forgets the pangs of childbirth. I would hope that be not true, for if there is aught I have forgot over what I do remember, then God's curse against women—"In sorrow thou shalt bring forth children—" must truly be the work of the Devil. (As it was! it was!)

Two years ago—a year ago—I would have been afraid to have *thought* that thought. Now I would blazon it across the forehead of any man who says Suffering is Holy.

My pains began, and Mr. Carson sent Mrs. R from the room with the admonition that she "look to the child and take her out of earshot". And he closed my chamber door, and waited there with me—for what purpose I could not at first imagine, for he spent his time walking from one to the next of Mr. Hogarth's 'cartoons', as indifferent to my ordeal as if he were blind—or deaf. For as long as I could, I bore my pains in silence, and when I could no longer—when the pain would mount until my body seemed on fire, I was already burning in Hell, and death held no terror, and I would scream—he came and stood at the foot of the bed and looked at me. Sometimes I thought a flicker of human emotion crossed his face, and perhaps it did—a kind of involuntary, unwilling memory would momentarily convulse his features, and then—by an obvious effort of will—he would smooth out his face again, and stare at me impassively. And the tide of my pain would turn, would come rolling back, mounting and mounting until at last the breakers would curl and commence to spill, and the pain would foam and churn

and tumble me helplessly in its grip, and I would hear myself screaming. And he would watch me.

So when the child came at last, and he flicked aside the covering sheet to stare at the helpless wet whelp, squirming between my legs, I had thought I could be afrighted of nothing more, but there was that in his expression that struck terror to my heart. I reached down and drew my babe into my arms, the spiraled cord still pulsing: we shared the same heartbeats still. And then, as I gazed rejoicing—rejoicing!—at his wet hair so scanty it was little more than peach down, but reddish—not so bright a red as his father's, that would come with time, as he grew older—but red, red like my love's, and his eyes blue—such a great tidal wave of joy seized me I nearly swooned. And Mr. Carson, as if I were a sheep, one of his ewes, unsheathed his penknife and cut the cord.

The child had given a cry—not strong, just a testing, as if he were trying out his lungs. His lips formed a O like a little fish, and he began to grope about, and I was moving to offer him my breast when Mr. Carson like some great bird of prey swooped down and seized the child from my arms.

“Look on your brat, woman, this one time!” and I gazed and gazed, and the eyes of my love stared back at me—unseeing, I feared, for our son was as yet not five minutes old. “Now I shall take him away,” said Mr. Carson, “out of this room of contamination and vileness. I shall claim him as mine, and no man shall laugh, or waggle his fingers on his forehead in mockery of me, though I be married to a slut, a vile festering sewer of sin!”

I tried to sit up, but could not. “Please!” I begged, and lifted my arms. “I *beg* you let me hold him—for a moment, only a moment—”

“Ye shall *never* hold him!” he cried hoarsely. “Ye shall *never* give him milk—ye shall *never* be this near him again—”

“Water,” I gasped. “I would drink—”

“The glass is at your hand.” He was moving away.

I reached across, and summoning up the last remnants of my strength I hurled the water from the glass onto my babe—onto *our* son, my love's and mine. “I baptise thee Trueblood!” I cried, “In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Ghost—Amen!” I sank back, and

fought for breath. "A babe once baptised is baptised forever—no man can change it. You must abide by this, and you know it, as you fear the flames of Hell! Lie to the world as you will—tell every man your wife is mad—but this you dare not change! My son's *Christian* name is Trueblood, whatever falseness is tacked on thereafter!"

He took the child away, and sent for a wet nurse, and so have I been bereaved of two children: of Constance, child of my heart, and of Trueblood, child of my body, my blood, my bone.

While I lay, too enfeebled to be of danger to anyone, Mrs. R attended me with a mixture of diminished caution and (I thought) some compunction, as if perhaps she no longer accepted quite so unquestioningly Mr. Carson's story of my mental collapse. After all, though she would not dare breathe a word, she must have been able to make the obvious association between the vanished Mr. Rhys's blue blue eyes and red red hair, and this little nestling's, whose curls gleamed in the sunshine like polished copper—as I myself could see, when summer slipped into autumn and in the late warm days Constance carried him about on the terrace beneath my window, playing with him as if he were an exceptionally well-made doll, and never once looking up toward me where I gazed from my prison.

This caused me to contemplate with the most profound foreboding what all this may have done to Constance. Sometimes I marvel that I should so love this child who is, after all, also the seed of Israel Carson—I can only explain it by acknowledging that I do not believe in *inherited sin*—Constance is *herself*, sweet, good, loving, and pure. But Constance is not just herself—like us all, she is herself *plus*: plus what has happened to her. And she was in the kitchen that day her father struck down my love, and dragged his bleeding body down the stair, dragged him past the kitchen windows and over to the smoke house. She heard the hammer blows as the nails were driven in, to shut fast the door. She heard the windows of my chamber being nailed shut. She heard me screaming. And in February when my love had been two (perhaps three) months dead, she must have seen her father busy himself to convert the smoke house into storage for ice, himself *levelling the floor*, he declared, with hay;

and then directing his workers to cut ice from the lake, *but he would do the stacking*, he said; and so my love's tomb was packed with the greenish blocks. And she will remember that after her brother was born, in September of that same year her father, having ordered a waggon-load of fine sand, did himself spread it and tamp it down, to make a good and lasting floor for his new 'ice house'. All these things she will remember.

When she is a woman grown, and remembering all this, will she think my sin equal to her father's? Surely she will judge mine to be the less—surely it is more evil to destroy by sin than to create by sin! When I gaze down where she plays with our son, it is hard for me to believe what my love and I did was so vile: how can something beautiful come from putrification? (That I, who love to garden, can ask so foolish a question!)

I can only hope that Mr. Carson's dread of being the target of malicious rumor and sly laughter will keep my son from suffering open neglect or outright abuse. I comfort myself that he is fed and clothed and cared for, and his frequent spells of crying mean only that everyone is busy, it is the harvest, it is canning time, it is winter and the fires need attending, it is spring and the sallet patch must be planted . . .

But oh! the ache in my arms and in my breast when I hear him cry and my arms are empty and my breasts dry and useless as an old woman's!

June 2, 1822

It is Training Day, Mrs. R tells me through the panel of my door, and so I know the day and the month. Mr. Carson has gone off to Welkin with the key to my room in his pocket. "There'll be vittles for ye, don't fret now, just as soon as the mister returns," she said almost crooning. I did not reply, but went over to the window, for I had heard Constance on the terrace below.

She had set her little brother down and was coaxing him to walk to her. "Come, love, come to Constance," she cooed in a voice like a dove. And when he, crowing, rocking precariously from one sturdy leg to the other, took four triumphant steps forward, she scooped him up in her arms and tipped his head back, pointing up to me. "See, there is my New-Mother who is your *true* mother,

dearest Trueblood," she said, kissing him on the cheek. "She loves you, dearest Trueblood, as she loves me—wave to your loving mother, there's a good boy—"

"Constance—oh my dear child—" I did not know if she had heard me through the glass. Mrs. R came bustling out, and shooed the children inside, as if they were chickens got loose by mistake. Constance is a wildling, I thought exultantly; they cannot pen her in. Though they try to clip her wings, she will escape them. She knows I love her, she loves me, and she will remember . . .

But oh! if only I had had the wit to smash one of the panes—had taken that candlestick and smashed the glass and thrust my Journal through—but Mrs. R would have seen, and she would have plucked up the volume as if it were a chicken for the pot—grabbed it, and kept it, and shewn it to Mr. Carson—and he would read my pages, he would read those lines where my love still lives, he would be *there* when my love kisses me—when my love embraces me—No! the idea is abhorrent! I *cannot* chance it!

By the time Mr. Carson returned from Welkin and the key was turned and the bolts slid back, and Mrs. R came in with my supper—my one meal—and Mr. Carson behind her, it was as if Constance's words had restored my will to speak. I looked across the bowl of porridge at my husband and for the first time since my son's birth, I spoke to him. "Take the candlestick which my father gave me on our wedding day," said I, "and give it to the church. I believe there is a name for such gifts: 'deodand'—is that not correct? For any object which has been the cause of a man's death? Though I fear this will not *lighten*—"

"Leave the room!" he said harshly to Mrs. R. "I fear my wife commences to rave again!"

"—lighten your guilt—"

"*Silence!* He could not go unpunished!" His eyes were black coals burning in the furnace of his face.

"Was his sin so much worse than yours? Yet *you* go free!"

"I am punished every day!" said Mr. Carson hoarsely. "I share this house with a vile and polluted strumpet—I dare not let you leave this room or you will contaminate my daughter and my son—" he drew back his lips in a smile like a death's head. "I have spent the day

replying to remarks of concern and consolation—so sad, so *sad*," he mocked, "my poor young wife still distraught? and have I tried the root of hard hack? or pine bark tea? or golden groundsel?"

"Send me to my father!" I begged. "Or does he no longer live? For it is fully a year and six months since I had word—"

"I wrote him when ye took ill. I said ye were seized with a brain fever, and there was naught to be done, but watch over you until death would release you, said I. Now eat your supper so I can take the dish away."

"I cannot eat," I said. And I turned and walked to the window overlooking my love's tomb. I heard Mr. Carson remove the plate and go out, locking the door and setting the bolts across. And all the while I stared down . . . and for the first time since I had felt life stir in my womb, more than a year ago, I permitted myself to think on his last hours . . . alone in the dark, dying alone, the cold stiffening his limbs, his mouth forever closed, his eyes forever stilled, forever shuttered from the light, his smile frozen, his hands his gentle warm good skilled hands turned to ice. And I knew how I shall be able to leave this chamber, and join him, and no one can stop me.

June 3, 1822

I have now been one day without food, and am not unduly hungry. After three days, I have heard, one no longer feels hunger pangs. I cannot bear any longer the sounds of this house, of children in the room below, of children on the terrace, but never in this room. I cannot bear to peer through my nailed-shut windows (were it not for the chimney, I should long since have suffocated). Although I do prefer the company of the harlot and her clientèle to my own face multiplied sixfold, nevertheless I commence to fancy I live in a whorehouse. To look from my windows and see there below on the slope down from the terrace that farcical mock Versailles being laid out—a *formal garden* of walks and steps and beds as elaborate and elegant in design as my paisley shawl! And the costly project being commanded by my *grieving* husband, I haven't a doubt, to coax me back from madness!

And all the while he keeps the weeds cut back, and the sumack axed down, and the lilacs trimmed, so that I

have a good clear view of the door behind which my love did breathe his last.

So I shall cuckold Mr. Carson once again, but this time I shall take as lover a rival he cannot strike down: I shall take to my bosom Death. I shall wait in this room until Death claims me, my tardy lover.

the 10th of June, perhaps

I believe it is a week since I wrote the above, and it is true: one no longer hungers. Mr. Carson seems angry. I believe he *is* angry, though perhaps he is relieved. He sees he cannot make me eat, and he must know what is the inevitable outcome, and I suspect he wishes it. He is a man of strong passions, and they do drive him, not he they. Yet he cannot lie with me, because were he to do so, it would be to condone my sin, and thus to share it. It appears there are some sins he is unwilling to commit, no matter what the provocation.

July

I wish I had the courage to burn these pages while yet I have the strength. But there is no fire, the days are hot and languid, I have no flint to kindle a flame. Each word takes me much time to write, but then I have time. No one comes. *He* does not come. I think he will not come again, for I have set on him a curse. A truly splendid curse!

He came and said the parson had heard I was dying, and did I not wish to eat the flesh and drink the blood of my Savior? And I said I would have nothing that my love had not had. "He was denied absolution," said I, "and so would I be denied, for I would grieve to find us separated in death as we were in life. It would pain me if he, unshriven, went to Hell, but I, last-breath repentant, was imprisoned in Heaven!"

Said Mr. Carson, "Then must I tell the man of the cloth ye refuse last rites?"

"Tell him my mind cannot grasp the need!" said I.

"Accursed woman, ye speak blasphemy!" Mr. Carson cried. "Do ye not fear the pangs of Hell?"

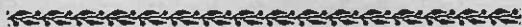
"I have had them," I said, "and in this very room. To see my love struck down—with what can the Devil threaten me that would cause me more pain? Here in this

room I have listened to my child crying for my sheltering arms—here my overflowing breast has ached for his relieving hunger. I accursed? Yes, but by the griefs of *this* life! Now do I curse you, Israel Carson. As my child's cries haunted my heart so shall they haunt you forever and ever until I am reunited with my love—until I find my love! As long as we lie alone and apart, *our* son shall haunt you, his father's murderer! And if it be that there is no hereafter, and I shall never find my love, then shall *you* hear my babe's cries forever—you will hear my child cry for me through all eternity—”

I knew of course this was scarcely coherent or indeed logical, but I knew, too, that my husband, though a Christian, did believe most devoutly in the efficacy of curses.

So now Mr. Carson does not come. I have ceased to exist for him, I believe. That is all to the good: if I am already dead in his eyes, I am no longer his wife. If I am no longer his wife, then can I be the bride of my beloved . . . forever and ever to lie in his arms, nothing to come between us when *Death do us join*. Death is not my lover after all but my father—he who ‘giveth this woman to this man’—so come, Father Death, shroud me in white and lead me forth. Put my hand in the hand of my beloved, join our bones if not our flesh.

Chapter Thirty-seven



A patter of rain struck the maples overhead. I closed Emelie's Journal, thrust it inside my shirt, and raced for the house. The rain held off. I put her Journal safe by Pentacost's heron on the table in my room, and then I stopped by the kitchen.

“Phone didn't ring once, Miss Emelie,” Grace said.

I nodded. “I'll be in the ice house.”

The rain was drumming up the slope; I could hear it coming, like a flock of sheep afrighted. I tipped back the

bar and pulled open the heavy door. I could see it clearly, there directly before me on the sandy floor: a shallow sunken irregularity. Here had been no pine box to moulder and collapse . . . here had been only what I had stumbled over that other time . . . what I had not stopped to examine, in my headlong flight. What had there been to fear? Only a bone . . . I stepped in, and knelt, and reached out my hand. "Hello, Parsloe Rhys," I said gently. The bone was cool and dry; the pulse in my wrist beat against it unfelt.

Now I knew what I must do. I returned to the kitchen, where Grace, William, and Pentacost looked round from where they sat hunched before the stove. The Rowdons rose to their feet.

I made a small, dismissive gesture with my hand. "Tell me—" I glanced from one to the other—"how do you two feel about the law? There's someone buried in the ice house—the man who painted all those portraits—he's the father of my great-great-grandfather," I said, looking round at Pentacost, as if that were a point on which he must be made clear. "I've been reading her Journal, so I know. His lady's Journal, I mean. Hers—Emelie Stark's. He was the father of her son Trueblood, and her husband, Israel, murdered him, and buried him in the ice house. Not exactly *buried*," I added carefully. "I found where he is. There's a bone—"

"Have some coffee, Miss Emelie," Grace said. She poured me a cup. "You'd ought not to let yourself get chilled. Or scared."

"I'm not scared," I said. "Parsloe Rhys is not a man to be scared of, alive or dead." I drank. It was wonderful to be alive, to drink hot liquid, sweet hot fluid . . . "I'm upset," I explained. "He ought not to be there, by himself that way, far from her. Wouldn't it be all right for us to move him to the Carson cemetery—just take him and bury him next to his Emelie, where he belongs? I mean—" for they were staring at me, mouths agape—"must we trot to the police? What difference does it make now—that he was murdered, I mean?"

William said slowly, "I'd rather not say, Miss Emelie. I don't feel it's my place to advise you."

"Seems like you could wait until Mr. St. John gets

home," Grace said evenly, as if it was a question put to her every day.

"Parsloe Rhys does not happen to be related to Mr. St. John!" I said. "He's *my* kin, and this is a family matter! I can't wait—"

No, I couldn't wait. "*As long as we lie alone and apart—*"

Pentacost blew on his spoon. "No point in callin' in a passel o' strangers," he nodded. "But Emmy, ye can't tell nothin' from one ol' bone. William 'n' me'll poke around 'n' see what's what—"

"I should say not!" Grace said sharply. "I say wait for Mr. St. John's say-so. It's not right for a woman to decide such a thing—*especially* considering!" she added ambiguously.

"They've been dead a hundred and fifty years!" My voice broke. "They've been separated long enough!"

"If it's been that long, Miss Emelie," William said soothingly, "another few days won't make any difference."

Pentacost followed me through the dining room to the hall. He stopped by the garden door. "Well, I'll be goin'," he said loudly, and added in a low voice, glancing over his shoulder like a conspirator, "Don't you fret, Emmy. I'll move yer lover for ye, lass. Wait'll you 'n' me is the only folks here, come Thursday when Mister and Missus Flintface is off to town."

"They usually leave about two o'clock," I said. If Pentacost kept confusing me with the first Emelie, that was his problem.

He was scowling unhappily. "Justin give me that spare picur he done of me—when he come to say goodbye, it was. I dunno—he seemed powerful put-out—like a man at the end o' his tether. Ye hasn't gone 'n' took another lover, has ye, lass?"

"Dear God, of *course* not! He's just upset—" I broke off. Whether or not I'd meant my vows, I *had* promised to 'honor' Justin, and that hardly included confiding details of our quarrels.

"There's some ye got to keep on a loose rein or they gits skittish," Pentacost said somberly.

I escaped upstairs. Picking up Emelie Stark's Journal, I held it for a moment against my breast. As I gazed out at the grieving world, I felt her presence so strongly it

was as if I embraced a friend; and I knew that when I had done what I must do there would be a final parting, and I would not welcome it, even though it would free Tamarack of one curse at least, and lay one ghost, and quiet a long-dead child.

I sank down on the rocker before the fire, and I opened her Journal, turning the pages with care, past where I'd thought she had laid down her pen forever—and there, overleaf from her appeal to Father Death, were her last words to her beloved. Feeling like a trespasser in some holy place, I read:

My love,

Soon I shall die, my darling, my love, and wherever you are I will come, and we will never be parted. No one can ever stand between us again, my love my love. I am not afraid—I welcome Death, for there, they say, there is no giving or taking in marriage, and we aren't married, are we? Though we are joined. Though our love has blossomed and borne fruit in our dear son Trueblood. Daily I feel closer to the leaving, to the looking, to the finding—and I rejoice. All I ask is to lie beside you through all eternity. Wait for me, my love, my darling, my dearest—I won't be long—wait for me!

Your Emelie

My eyes stung. Why hadn't I known how to pour out my heart, as Emelie Stark had known—why couldn't I just put down on paper the true depth and strength of my love for Justin, instead of composing that wretched, inhibited, frost-bitten note that read like a . . . a shopping list? Of course it did not bring him home! Of course it would not . . . Poor Justin.

At the bottom of the page there were three lines in a childish script, the words formed with painstaking care:

Dearest New-Mother,

I love you. I shall always love you. I shall always pray for you. I shall never forget you.

I pressed the words to my lips. Dear Constance! Had she slipped into the room as Emelie lay dying (or was

already dead) and filched the Journal? And had kept it hidden, as a treasure of her own, her remembrance of her father's new wife, who had given her the only real love she ever knew, until Trueblood . . . Yes, or course: it must have been Constance.

I turned the page.

October 1846

Dearest New-Mother,

My time draws near and I await the sight of my child's face with eager joy. I am not afraid: truly I am not. Though I have now and again been apprehensive I too might leave a motherless child (for in my dreams I have heard my beloved wailing for your cradling arms, your comforting breast—as he did all that last winter of your life), yet have I no real fear, for *our* Trueblood comforts and encourages me. But still, one must think on all things, and I would not have this testament of your True Love defamed by unloving eyes. My father's widow is much occupied with her own sons and might not view your words with the understanding or clemency a woman less *driven* could command. So for a brief while, dearest New-Mother, I return it to you—I shall slip your Journal in by your happy picture, the one where you wear your green gown, and stand gazing at our beloved Trueblood's father (forgive me—I have read all your words, and know your joys as well as your griefs). Dearest New-Mother, when I am safely out of the Valley of the Shadow of Death I shall ask you to give your Journal back to me, for I cherish it above all things—you are truly *my* mother as well as his, and from you I learned what love, and a loving heart, can be.

Ever your Constance

There was nothing more. Father Death had sent Trueblood's bride, like so many other Carson wives, to an early sleep.

I turned the empty pages. There, overleaf on the last page, was a brief note in Gam's hand, her writing young, unformed, and spirited. I could almost hear her laughter as she penned the sprawling lines:

* * *

This Book was found by Luke Carson and Martha Carson behind the panel nearest the door in the West Room of Tamarack, this first day of August, 1895. We shall tell no one—it will be our secret. Luke knows a better hiding place: behind the portrait of Israel Carson that hangs over my mantel—the back board is loose. “I wager it’ll haunt the old devil proper,” Luke says. “He’s the Original Sinner, he is.”

Gam—Gam and Luke! Both had been driven from Tamarack, from the Tamarack they loved, and had come back only in death.

I went down to supper in a state of nerves. Justin too had been driven away, though he had heard nothing I had heard. Not believing in ghosts had not kept him safe, had not kept him *here*. For Justin was an artist: of course Israel would move heaven and earth—would move *hell* and earth—to rid Tamarack of him! Why did I think that whenever we were away we were happy, happy and at ease with one another, but as soon as the walls of Tamarack closed around us, jealousy and spite and distrust thrust between us like a—a poisonous vine? If only I could move poor Parsloe Rhys *now*—reunite the lovers *now*—rid Tamarack of Israel *now!* Before Justin returned. So that he *could* return!

Without any real hope, I took to listening for the car as well as for the phone, and I heard neither the one nor the other the rest of that evening, or all the next day, which was Wednesday, or Thursday morning. By the time the Rowdons left on Thursday afternoon, it was all I could do to greet Pentacost calmly. If I were to blurt out all my fears it might frighten him off, and I’d have to move Parsloe Rhys myself. And if I didn’t, or couldn’t, Israel would win: Justin would never return.

“I brung his box,” Pentacost said. “I put it by him, handylike. Now don’t stir yourself, Emmy, until I gits him free. But I needs to borry one o’ Grace’s big spoons, ’n’ a whisky broom. Can’t go after ’im like he was ’taters or turnips, lass.”

“No,” I said faintly, and got him the tools he requested. “Let me know when you’re done. I ought to help lay him out.” As one of his womenfolk, I thought.

An hour later Pentacost was back. “I got what’s left

of him, Emmy." He poured himself a glass of cider. "Dry work, diggin' up the dead. Gives a man a powerful thirst."

"I'll be with you in a minute—I just remembered something . . ." And I went to fetch Emelie Stark's Journal. She'd want at least her letter to be with him. I couldn't bear to part with the whole Journal, but her last words of love—buried in his grave, they'd be safe from Israel's eyes.

The door to the ice house was propped open with Pentacost's spade, and the sun reflected in on the scattering of weathered ivory . . . on a scrap of leather . . . on what might have been a belt buckle.

"Damn funny way to bury a man, Emmy, on his face like that." Pentacost squatted on his heels. "You'd 'a' thought he was tryin' to climb outta his grave."

All that was left of Parsloe Rhys was stretched before us in the shallow excavation Pentacost had scooped and brushed away. It was as if some prankster had taken the skeleton from an anatomy class and had shoved it from behind, to send it sprawling . . . *all* that was left of Parsloe Rhys? No! *I* was part of him—the child I carried was part of him. . . .

I knelt, and put my hand over the outstretched hand before me. "He *was*, Pentacost! He was alive when he was thrown in here! He was buried alive by that monster Israel Carson . . ." Whose blood also flows in my veins, I thought with a shudder. Who is also part of the child I carry. I am what I am because of Israel, too.

"Don't fret, Emmy—we'll git him moved where he b'longs. I got the grave all dug, waitin'. Lordy, but I expect he'll be glad to lie beside you tonight—like ye say, it's been a turrible long time."

"Pentacost, *stop* it! I'm Emelie Carson, not Emelie Stark! I'm not *dead*! Look—these bones are Emelie Stark's lover!"

"I knows that. And I knows who you be now, Emmy. You be Justin's wife. But you was *his* sweetheart once, ain't that so? Howsoever, he's been dead a hunderd 'n' fifty years—ye'd oughtta bear that in mind, Emmy, 'n' not go tormentin' Justin this way. 'I'm leavin',' he says. An' when I says, 'What about *her*?'—'She's in love with a dead man,' he says."

"That's not true—not any longer," I said hopelessly.

He's seen the portraits: he must have. That's why he gets us confused . . . takes me for her. If Pentacost saw them, and Gam, and Luke—who else did?

"We better git on with it, Emmy." He had stepped back into the shadows beyond the pile of sand, and now he brought forth a simple pine box scarcely large enough for Clemmy. "I'll just pop 'im in here—"

"But Pentacost—they'll—he'll be all jumbled!"

"Well, but his connections is gone," he said reasonably. "Besides, this'n's snugger'n a man-sized box—no room to go rattlin' 'n' bargin' about."

"I'll get something to cover him, then," I said faintly.

I went up to the attic, to one of the trunks of bedding. I was sorting over the faded quilts when I heard the phone. It rang five times as I raced down the angled stairs. When I reached my bedroom there was no one, just a dial tone. I could have wept.

Justin would have waited longer, I told myself as I went back up. It must have been someone else, someone who had no idea how far I could be from the phone . . . Vale, probably.

I found a small quilt, very old and worn. Within its compassionate folds, the confusion of bones wouldn't matter so much. . . .

"Step aside, Emmy," Pentacost said. "This ain't fittin' work for a woman." And he commenced to move them one by one, laying the bones neatly in the quilt-padded box. "Poor lad, poor lad."

I had the Journal open, and with utmost care I removed the letter to her love. Kneeling, I laid the page so that her last words were next to him, and I folded the quilt across. Pentacost closed the lid. It was hinged, and had only a hasp to keep it shut.

"Come Judgment Day, zingo! he's out," Pentacost said, and was swinging the box to his shoulder when again I heard the phone.

"I'll meet you there!" I cried. "You go on and wait for me!" and I plunged heedlessly through the raspberries to snatch the phone from the hook on the kitchen wall. "Hello? Hello—"

"That you, Hackmatack? Joe, here—"

He and Syd had got as far as Concord. Question: where was Welkin? Not on his map—how about that?

Sinister, huh? Time dragged, time stood still while I explained. We were clogging the line while Justin might be trying to phone, I thought in despair; what if he were dialing—

Joe hung up. For a moment I waited, fully expecting the phone to ring again, and it would be Justin. Then, reluctantly, I went out. If Pentacost had the grave ready, as he said, five minutes there . . . ten at the most . . . I needn't be away from the phone more than three quarters of an hour at the outside. . . .

Dear God! I'd left Emelie's Journal there in the ice house—just leaped and run and left it behind! It wouldn't take a minute to fetch it; I could take it along to the grave: that would be fitting, somehow.

I lifted the bar and swung open the door and stepped in, peering to see where the Journal lay. Perhaps I did it myself—yes, surely I did, for my hand was on the door as I stepped past, and there was little wind, nothing that would set the door to swinging shut. Which is what it did: it swung shut behind me, and the bar, nicely balanced, dropped into place.

The blackness was absolute. The blackness was so intense it seemed to pulsate. I couldn't move. I might trample her Journal. I might slip on the piles of sand, stumble into the excavation. Falling would not be good for me, not be good for the child. Neither was fear. This fright that poured through my veins could storm the placenta and terrify the child. *I must not panic!* Stay calm. Very calm.

What was there here to fear, anyway? Snug stone walls, stone roof sturdy and enduring—did I think they would collapse? True, the vent had been closed, but there was lots and *lots* of air in here—long before I could possibly have breathed it up, Pentacost would come looking for me. Probably he was already.

Cautiously, I put a hand behind me and groped for the door. Had he put some kind of latch through—no, of course not: the whole point of that double-thick door was to keep heat out, and cold in; there would be no aperture of any kind.

I put both palms against the door and shoved as hard as I could. I *knew* this wouldn't open it—how could it?—but I'd feel like such a fool if, after a lengthy search,

I was found cowering here in the dark, and all I had needed to do was push . . .

We had emptied the ice house of Parsloe Rhys and entombed me in his stead.

No. Not true. Pentacost would soon be here. He was coming to see what was keeping me. He was passing the inlet . . . had started up the slope . . . How long had I been here? Ten minutes? Fifteen? An hour? Surely not an hour. Ten minutes at the most. Pentacost wouldn't be tired of waiting yet. He was still by the grave, probably. Probably daydreaming. He could easily forget all about me. But the Rowdons would be back this evening. Would they check to see if I were home? No, they never did that. But in the morning, when I didn't come down for breakfast—*In the morning!*—That was hours and hours away! And it might be noon before they'd go to see why I wasn't up. And where would they look?

We'd sealed me in my coffin. My coffin was stone. A most spacious, roomy sarcophagus, its dimensions almost regal. More than adequate for Emelie née Carson, mistress of Tamarack . . .

Stop it! Do something! Dig a hole by the door. A hole for air. A hole to shout through . . . I felt along the door's edge: the stones overlapped the jamb. Was there a sill? I crouched . . . The door closed over solid rock.

Pentacost would forget about me. The Rowdons would be unaware. And Justin—Justin would think I'd left him. Or was in the lake, and would search there, would drain the lake, and all the while I'd already be in my grave. Perhaps he would not come back at all. Of course he would come back, when the Rowdon's finally realized . . . Pentacost would tell him, if he remembered . . . if he kept clearly in mind *who* I was. Where I was.

Could I *carve* my way out? Scrape a hole through the wood of the door, scrape with a piece of rock, a sharp-edged rock like flint . . . make a hole I could reach through, and release the bar? My searching fingers found no loose rock anywhere. Parsloe Rhys had been covered with sand . . . there was nothing . . . there was only Emelie Stark's Journal. Hugging it to me, I shrank back against the door. I would sit here, not moving; I would stay calm, her Journal in my arms like a—a shield

against harm, and when I was released, I would politely beg everyone's pardon for being so stupid . . .

We had entombed me in her lover's stead, and I'd never see Justin again. He'd never said he loved me, I'd never heard him say he loved me, and now I never would. I'd never see his eyes when he learned about the child. *He'd said he'd never go away again and leave me alone, but he did!* He said he'd never leave me to cope with my ghosts alone—

I screamed with all my strength: "Justin!" And then again: "Justin—Justin!" The stones smothered my cries. It was stupid to scream—the sound only magnified my terror. Why had I, then? Because somehow it was expected? It was a ritual—one is trapped, one panics, one goes through useless motions, one screams? Was I then so docile, so suggestible? And if I was, *was someone here to enjoy my terror?*

I stared at the blackness. It was empty, surely. Ten feet away was the rear wall. On either side the walls were within reach, if I but leaned a bit and stretched out my arm. If I stood, I could easily flatten my palms on the stone slabs overhead. I *knew* what was there: I'd explored this space twice . . . three times. At the moment it was unseen, which was disquieting, but it was not really unheard—it was sending back . . . *listen, listen!* . . . the dull, subliminal beat of my heart, the barely audible pulse of blood through my body . . . No, I was imagining it. But there was some sound. There in the blackness that swirled about me there was something . . . there was a rustling.

There was a rustling as of dry grass—coarse dry grass.

"Murder," Dixon Mansfield had said long, long ago, "is a crime for which there is no statute of limitations." It was true: for this ultimate sin there's no compassionate cut-off date, not in Heaven, not in Hell. So now I knew what the sound was, I knew who was there: Israel Carson was there . . . Israel Carson, trying to conceal what he had done, was spreading hay over the floor of the ice house . . . was trying to spread the concealing hay *quick, quick!* before the workers brought in their first load of ice . . .

I shrank back against the door, my knees against my chest, Emelie's Journal against my heart a talisman

to ward off his rage. The sound was different now . . . a rasping, a scraping, a sudden grating. Israel Carson was leveling the floor—smoothing and evening the floor with good clean river sand *quick, quick!* before any rumor could spring up and set off a search. It must have taken a foot or so of sand to cover his victim. How much would that weigh? Half a ton? A ton? Hadn't anyone noticed what he was up to? Hadn't anyone gossiped?

Slowly, cautiously, I tried to change my position. There was a persistent discomfort in my lower back I couldn't seem to ease. I slid my legs straight and arched my spine; still holding Emelie's Journal with one hand, with the other I pressed against the small of my back. It didn't help. I must be careful not to get in the way. So far Israel Carson had mercifully ignored me . . . or perhaps he thought me already beside him in the burial ground beyond the lake . . .

The pain struck with such savagery I cried out in disbelief. Then it was gone. The air before me was silent, black as onyx and as opaque; perhaps I had startled him, frightened him away. Perhaps if I stood up—*oh, God!* This time I made no sound, easing my breath in silently, as silently releasing it. The digging commenced again, spade cautiously thrust into sand, spade scraping and scraping about but coming no nearer. *A knife—oh, God, it's a knife in my back!* and I twisted away, but I could not escape the stabbing. I pressed my face, I pressed my hands against the door. Emelie Stark's Journal spilled from my grasp, but it didn't matter. Nothing mattered except *oh God oh God I'm losing our child! Why doesn't Justin come? Why doesn't he?*

Time blurred. Half an hour . . . an hour . . . two hours . . . a lifetime. The pain moved from my back to my pelvis, to my hips, to all of me—the pain *was* me, and it was never going to stop: forever and forever this fire, this burning flesh-consuming fire. I screamed. I screamed, and the stones of my prison-tomb screamed back at me where I lay, and I felt the hot blood running, all my bright joy lost in a rush of blood. And the silent blackness empty and untenanted as a grave spread over me like a shroud. I put my arms over my face and I grieved.

The first I knew Justin was there—that the door was open—was the sweet rush of air. He drew my hands from

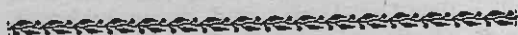
my face and I saw beyond my prison it was still day: the traitor sun which had risen so blithely that morning when my child was still safe in my womb had not yet set.

"Emelie—sweetheart—it's all right now, it's all right!" he said, as if the words could make it right. "Don't be frightened, it's all right—"

"Where were you?" I cried. "Why didn't you come? Why *didn't* you? It's *not* all right—I've lost the baby, don't you see? The baby's dead! You're too late—I waited and waited and you didn't come—you *killed the baby because you didn't come!*"

At the look on his face, then, at the look in his eyes, I commenced to sob as if my heart would break. It seemed to me I could hear it shatter.

Chapter Thirty-eight



Sweet with summer, the air sighed through my sunlit window.

I heard Justin's step on the stair.

"Asleep?"

"Not exactly." I sat up; pushing the hair from my eyes, I gazed at him as if to memorize his face. Like that first time, I thought in anguish. "Plotting how to keep you here."

"We've been over and over this, Emelie. There's no way I can stay. Now that it's come to the point, you're upset, naturally. But if you'll just keep firmly in mind how you've never trusted me, I promise you, in a week you'll think yourself well rid of me."

"That's not true, and you know it." I fought to keep my voice steady. "Of course I didn't trust you then—when we first met, I mean—you called me a vulture, remember? But I've changed since then—I thought you had, too. You *can't* still think I meant it—you *know* I didn't!"

"Oh, you meant it, all right. It was hardly the moment

for dissimulation, was it? When we're standing on the bed-rock of our lives, Emelie—when we're making love, or giving birth, or dying—that's when we're truly ourselves: that's when we say what we really mean. The same thing holds true for when we're in great pain, of body or of spirit—believe me, whatever we say then is the truth as we see it. I can't see our marriage is any longer worth the gamble. It's time to cut our losses."

"Trust," I said bitterly. "Why do you put that ahead of everything else?"

"Because without it 'to love and to cherish' are empty phrases, nothing more, but unfortunately—like all words—not harmless. Well, I've been stung before, and so, I should think, have you."

"I love you," I whispered. Why was it so hard to say it? Because I hadn't much practice? "I told you—"

"I know you think you do, but you'll get over it."

"Like a bad cold?" I bit my lip. What would Emelie Stark have said? *Oh, my love, my love.* The words would not come.

He said evenly, "Emelie, I've done what I said I would: Tamarack is yours, safe and secure. It's all set up so nobody can give you any hassle over Martha's stipulations. Gordon and Merrill have accepted the inevitable, not gracefully, but no matter. Even Mansfield is exhibiting symptoms of a laudable neutrality." His voice was dry, emotionally detached. "Merrill seems to have burnt that bridge; I wonder how?"

"Justin, *listen to me!*" *My love my love, listen to me.* "Supposing I could prove I *do* trust you now, would you still insist on going?" Emelie the Lawyer, I thought in disgust. Emelie the Great Debater.

"I'm not insisting, Emelie—it's high time I left. Good God, I should think you'd had enough of me! As for trust, you don't because you can't. No woman could!"

"I'm not 'no woman'," I said doggedly. "I'm *me*. Supposing I can't help it—that's the way I'm made—and I trust you no matter what. Supposing I say something—do something—right now I can't think what, but something—and *you* can't help yourself, you have to believe me—what then?"

He went over to the window, where he stood for a moment gazing out. Sunlight playing along the line of his

cheek was like a caress. If only I could put my hand there, I thought . . . if I could stroke his face . . .

"Stop it, Emelie!"

"No, but *listen!*" I said desperately. "I make you a bet—you're always saying you're a gambler—all right, then, I *bet* you that—that tomorrow—by this time tomorrow—I will have proved I didn't really mean it—it was a lie, I was *lying* when I said—"

"*For God's sake don't repeat what you said!*" He turned, his eyes scalding my face. After a moment he laughed, but without amusement. "You don't give up, do you? Very well, you're on." He shrugged, and glanced at his watch. "Twenty of ten. If by ten o'clock tomorrow—twenty minutes extra, very gracious of me, don't you think?—if by then you haven't convinced me, I'll be off, and you, my dear, will spare us both any further protests, accusations, or lamentations. By the way, what are the stakes?"

"Everything I have." I could barely speak. "All my capital—the rest of my life."

"Fair enough." He smiled thinly. "I'll match that."

I blinked back tears. "Let's shake on it, then." I tried to smile. "Word of—word of honor."

He solemnly shook my hand, then bent and kissed me on the cheek. "All right—word of honor. But it's hopeless, Emelie—you can't win." He tucked the quilt about me. "You own Tamarack. You can't own me."

"Who said I wanted to? Now please go away and leave me alone. I c-can't think when you're near."

When he'd gone out, I wrapped my arms about my knees and gazed disconsolately at his tamaracks there on the table by the window. "I'm packing," Justin had told me, "and this is too fragile to be shuttled about, so I'll leave it with you. Besides, now that I finally have Pentacost's message straight—" a muscle leaped in his cheek—"I don't particularly care to have it around." He was right: words are weapons, and mine had been a dagger to the heart. But *so were his*.

Oh, yes, I would have Tamarack. Was I supposed to hug it to myself for comfort?

"Too much hate—Tamarack has seen too much hate," Gam had said. I'd only added more—"Your fault—yours!"—what were they but words of hate? Another curse—I

hadn't meant them so, but they were! they were! How could I prove to him now that I hadn't meant what I'd said, I didn't hold him to blame, I really did trust him, I really did want him here? Doubly difficult, I thought, because I didn't *truly* trust him entirely . . .

I didn't trust him not to think I was daft, for instance, were I to tell him about Israel in the ice house . . . were I to tell how that ghost was laid to rest at last. Pentacost had done it, not I. Waiting by the grave he'd dug for Parsloe Rhys, he'd heard the Audi return, and he'd resigned himself to a further long wait. But there came Justin—finding the house empty, he'd thought I might have gone to visit Gam. "We been diggin' up her kinfolk," Pentacost told him. "This artist feller—" whacking the box—"was there in the ice house." Justin had gone racing back, whereupon Pentacost had taken it into his head to finish the job on his own. "Poor feller, there he was, waitin', Emmy. So I tucked him in. Skippin' the frills and furbelows, I jes' tucked him in next to ye." No, I couldn't tell this to Justin now. (Perhaps I never would.)

But there would be no more candles in an empty room, or unseen babies crying; there'd be no more endless labors in the ice house: *those* ghosts were laid, I knew. Now I had to deal only with the one I myself had stirred up: the demon of guilt and grief. If Justin would not stay—if I didn't manage to win our absurd wager—Israel Carson would have won after all.

As I gazed at the sunlight spilling over the sculpture he had disowned, I commenced to weep. I grieved for our loss all over again, and grieved for him, for his agonized self-blame—"Of course you meant what you said, because it was true! You did lose the baby because I didn't come! It's as simple as that!"—and I grieved for myself, too, for my empty body, empty bed, empty house, empty years ahead. And I couldn't think how to change any of it.

When Grace brought my lunch, I blotted my face and told her to put the tray on the table; I'd eat by the window, I said.

"That's more like it, Miss Emelie. You got to make an effort. You won't get your strength back otherwise."

I looked at the tray: there was enough for a lumber-

jack. "You're doing your part, I must say—" My voice broke.

She said sharply, "Now stop that! A body'd think no woman ever had a miscarryin' before. Happens all the time, and the next thing you know, they got a houseful. You got to keep at it."

I didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

"You got to pull yourself together, Miss Emelie. William and me, we just can't bear to see him—this has just about tore him in two, and that's a fact. He walks around this house like he doesn't belong here, he's just visiting. And he never calls you 'Mrs. St. John' any more. William asks him where to put this, what to do about that, he won't say. 'You'll have to ask Miss Emelie,' he says. Like he's got no right to be here."

I said shakily, "I'll try to come down for supper, Grace."

I sat there at the table with the sunshine splashing on the windowsill, and I looked at the carving of the tamaracks . . . the young trees reaching for the light . . . and it was precisely then that the notion came to me. I sat with my cup halfway to my lips. *Why not?* Lots of reasons. Justin might refuse, for one thing. Dixon Mansfield might come up with some insurmountable objection. But for myself it would be eminently logical. And for Tamarack it could well solve everything.

I went to the phone. Dixon Mansfield was at home; he would come see me. "I've been wanting to come, Emelie," he said.

"Good. Bring your copy of Martha's Will, and of that letter with all her stipulations. I may want to refer to them."

And then I reached for writing paper and pen. I wanted to have it down before Dixon Mansfield got here; there would be less to argue about. If Gam could write her own Will, surely I could write a—a Won't. Surely I could draft a viable Deed of Gift. Just plainly state my intentions in the simplest words:

"I give to Justin Delacroix St. John, whom I married on the thirtieth of October of last year, which is the same year I inherited from Martha Stark Carson the house and lands known as Tamarack, those same lands and house. They are to be his absolutely on the thirtieth of October

five years from the day of our marriage, by which time Tamarack will have become mine, mine to keep or give away, as I wish." And I dated it.

Dixon Mansfield did 'cut up rough,' as Gam would say. He was clearly shocked to the very marrow of his being.

"This is very—ah—ill-advised, my dear. Really you should not—ah—yield to your husband in such a matter!"

"Justin has had nothing whatsoever to do with this," I said in a steely voice. "He knows nothing about it."

"Well, my dear child, it's—ah—very loosely worded. For instance, you do not call him your husband—"

"For the very good reason he may not *be* my husband then. He doesn't have to stay married to me to have Tamarack!"

"My dear *child*! This isn't at all what Martha wanted! I simply cannot countenance anything like this—"

"Gam," I said sharply, "is dead, and I am not asking you to countenance it! I am asking you to make sure it's legal. Legal and binding. There's nothing in her Will, is there, to prevent my giving Tamarack away, provided I give it all?"

"My *dear* child, you are not yourself! You ought not to do anything so—ah—so final at this time. You need no longer fear any outside—ah—pressure or embarrassment—"

"So I understand," I said coolly. "I hear Merrill has put the River House on the market." Justin had let drop that bit of information, on our way home from the Welkin infirmary a week ago. She was packing her impedimenta, he'd said casually, and soon would scrape the mud of Welkin from her feet. "Figuratively speaking," he'd added, driving slowly and carefully, as if I were a glass of water he didn't want to spill.

Dixon cleared his throat. "Merrill regrets her tendency to—ah—to intervene in the natural course of events—to try to act the *dea ex machina*, if I may be permitted the phrase."

I thought of course that he was making oblique reference to those unsigned letters, but it seemed not. It was the portrait of Israel that was troubling Dixon—the ownership thereof, that is, and his own conscience.

"The River House furniture that Martha left to you included their contents, as you know," he went on. "At my request Gordon moved the items of your legacy out of reach of the tenants. I knew that the portrait was stored in that—ah—capacious cupboard—" he stared unhappily at the Eastlake clothes press—"but later it was found in the attic, apparently part of Merrill's legacy. Who moved it? Gordon, without a doubt, but at Merrill's—ah—connivance. I have reason to think she knew its value. She knew of those others, you see—she must have. She complained that Henry had left 'buried treasure' to a bedridden old woman—I thought at the time it was just a fanciful turn of phrase." He transferred his unhappy gaze to me. "You see my dilemma, my dear. The painting should have been yours all along. Then Justin bought it to give to you, paying, need I add, a staggering sum—"

"You aren't thinking Justin would expect Merrill to return the money?" I said incredulously.

Dixon cleared his throat. "That's the—ah—the heart of the matter. I ask myself: did Justin know all along Martha had left it to you, but the purchase was his—ah—his graceful way of infusing new life into his former wife's possibly depleted finances?"

"Dixon," I said, and my voice shook with fatigue, "I don't want to talk about it any more. I'm not going to change my mind, no matter what you say." *No matter what you imply. Untrue! It's all untrue! He does not love her . . .* "Tell me plainly: is this legal, the way I've written it? Is it binding? And shouldn't it be witnessed?"

Reluctantly, Dixon agreed it was probably binding. And then he witnessed my signature himself, as did Vale, who came in just then bringing a bottle of scent and a stack of the latest magazines.

When he was gone, "Vale," I said, "I don't understand it. You know about these things—can you explain it to me? I don't even *like* her, not really. How could everybody—Donnet, Gordon, Dixon, even Justin—dear God, he gave up painting for *seven* years!—I don't understand it!"

"Honey pet," Vale said, "it isn't the saints that are dangerous, or the bitches, either—it's the bitches that masquerade as saints."

The sunlight danced and glittered the rest of the long afternoon. I didn't go down to supper after all.

The 12th of June

I breakfasted alone at the table by the window. When Grace came after my tray, it was nowhere near ten o'clock, but I could not wait. I asked her if Mr. St. John were about. "He's holed up in his workroom," she said.

I took the Deed of Gift, and I went carefully down the curving stair. The north door was open, and the garden door; the scent of rain swept through the hall. I reached the library only to hear Justin's quick step go up the angled stair. I couldn't keep chasing about; I'd go to his studio and wait for him there.

I was standing beneath the Israel Carson (his eyes nothing but pigment on a pine board) when the door clicked shut behind me. "You were looking for me?" Justin said, and he didn't sound at all as if he thought he didn't belong here.

"I wanted to give you this." He was looking at me as if we'd scarcely met. "I—it's early, but I couldn't wait. I hate suspense," I said, and handed him the Deed. He read it at a glance. Frowning, he looked up at me.

"I take it this is why you sent for Dixon Mansfield yesterday? Do you mean to tell me he countenanced this preposterous document? Just what, if anything, is it supposed to prove? Aside from the fact that you have quite lost your mind, of course."

"Why, that I—I trust you—"

"In what way? Instead of my being here subject to your gracious whim, you would be here subject to mine—is that it?"

"I may not be here at all," I said in a low voice. "I'm giving you Tamarack the way you say all gifts should be given—with no strings attached. There's nothing in that paper that says I go with it. I was very careful not to refer to you as my husband, because you may have divorced me by then—"

"Not a chance," he said coldly. "After my performance these past few weeks, I assure you I cannot conceive of any circumstance you could devise which would provoke me to such a step."

"But you're free to divorce me any time you choose,"

I told him. "I burnt my copy of our contract—I burnt it in May, when I—when I was sure."

"Emelie," he said, and I was appalled to see he was in a rage, "are you trying to humiliate me beyond all endurance? Do you seriously think I would be willing to live here—openly and shamelessly accept title to this house from the wife who lost her child because of me? Didn't I hang around and hang around in Montreal, nursing my goddam bruised ego like a sulky ten-year-old? Hasn't it occurred to you to wonder what the hell I was doing?"

"If a man can't be betrayed when there's no true marriage, neither can a woman! You wouldn't have gone if I'd told you what you had every right to know."

"Perhaps. I've always held that was one right a man has to earn." His eyes narrowed. "And don't start prattling about forgiveness. I don't believe in it. I've never forgiven Merrill—why should you forgive me?"

"Dear God, she did what she did *on purpose*—"

"She didn't love me. I love you. That compounds my offense beyond measure. Which is why I can accept nothing from you. There is also the little matter of my conscience, if you don't find the notion laughable. I didn't marry you to help you get Tamarack. I married you, as you've suspected all along, because I wanted Tamarack for my own. Since I first set foot here, I've lusted after this house, and this land, and I thought I could get them by marrying you. The use of them, anyway, as if they were my own. That first time I saw you, crouched there on the stairs, I thought you were Tamarack come to life, and I thought, that's the heir, this house and this land will be hers, and if I can take her, I'll have them too. And so I went after you. I thought you'd be easy game, and I'd bring you down, and garner all the fringe benefits as well. You were pretty, and might, with coaxing, be beautiful; your manner seemed pleasant and you had an air of breeding, suitable to the wife of the lord of the manor." His smile mocked us both. "It never crossed my mind I'd fall in love with you. I'd had that raging fever when I was young, and thought myself immune. Well, there must be more than one strain of the virus."

Then stay, I thought. Oh my love my love, why can't you stay?

"Would you care to know precisely when I was stricken? In the burial ground, when you said, 'Which way are the dead looking, then?' I thought, God help her, she's beating her wings against something she can't see, and she'll break them . . . I was caught, then, though I didn't realize it until later. The disease can have a deceptive period of dormancy, flaring up only when it's past the curative stage. So in my case, anyway." After a moment, his eyes dropped from mine to the paper in his hand. "I'm tempted to keep this—it's the most extraordinary love letter I ever received." He ripped it across, and then again. "But also the most compromising. I can't accept, Emelie. You deserve more than a rogue like me. I love you too much to risk hurting you further."

"Dear God," I whispered, "but you are beyond belief, Justin St. John! The first time you ever tell me you love me, in the next breath you add that you're leaving—and why? To spare me further hurt! What *rot!* Why don't you admit you're cutting and running b-because from here on the going gets rough? Houses have to be looked after, and w-wives get older and not so desirable, and the children come and are a terrible responsibility and sometimes a heartbreak—but *you* are off and away so that *I* can be free of you!" I flicked my finger at the scraps of my Deed of Gift, scattering them across the trestle table. "I could write that over and over until Doomsday but it wouldn't mean anything to you! It's clearly impossible for me to prove I trust you, because you don't *want* to believe it, do you? I should have known you'd bet only on a sure thing, and marriage, God knows, is the biggest gamble of all! So Tamarack will be empty again—"

"Nonsense—you'll be here!"

"Do you think I could stay here without you?" I said incredulously. "To lie in my bed and hear your step on the stair, but never your hand on the latch? I've rid this house of Israel Carson but there's no way I can rid it of you! Dear God, I'd meet you at every turn! Believe me, Justin, I'm not brave enough to play the role of widow when I'm not a widow—when my husband's ghost *could* wear flesh and blood but *will* not! Here where I've been happier than I ever d-dreamed possible—"

"*Here?*" Plainly he did not believe me. "Here you've been happy?"

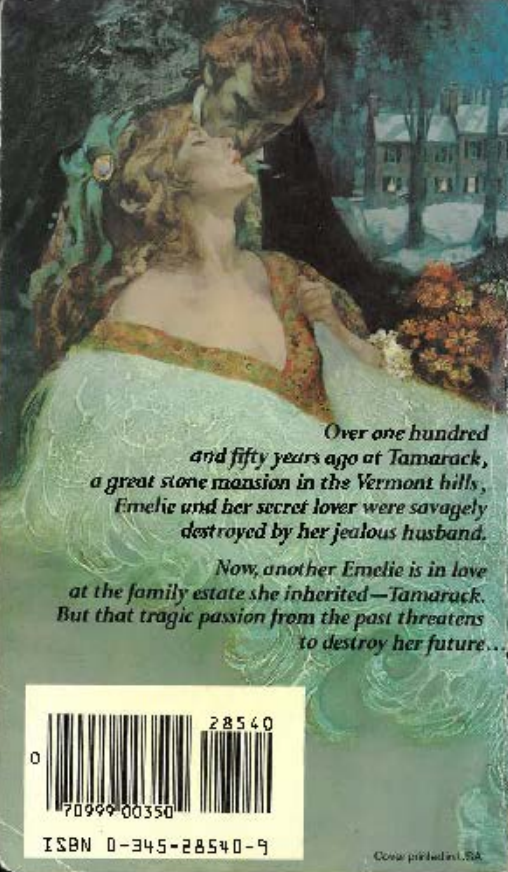
"Of course, dear God," I whispered. "Justin, don't you know *anything* about women? I wanted your child so terribly! I didn't *mean* what I said—it wasn't your fault, I knew it wasn't, it was mine—there's something awfully wrong with me, because whatever I love, I lose. As now—oh, God, I can't bear it!—as now I'm losing you!" I'd vowed I wouldn't, but I couldn't help it, I commenced to sob. "Why can't I ever tell you how much I love you? Oh my love my love—what's wrong with me that I can't say it?"

"Emelie, stop it—will you please stop it?" and he pulled me into his arms. "Listen—listen to me! I asked the impossible, I see that now. No one can prove trust in twenty-four hours—of course not! It takes—oh, at a minimum, a lifetime—" As if he could not help himself, he is the rain and I am the earth, his lips brushed my forehead, my cheek. "Emelie, listen to me—are you listening? Will you wed me, Emelie Carson? Properly, in front of a priest? One of those conventional old-fashioned marriages of *inconvenience*, because they're forever? Do you trust me enough for that?" His eyes—I couldn't believe it!—his eyes were begging me, humbly pleading—Justin! Justin St. John!

"Dear God, yes!" I said hurriedly. "Of course I do! Of course I will! Since I've won our wager after all!"

Oh God, he is hungry. It has been a long and unseasonable drought.

"Idiot," he said tenderly, "don't you know between a man and woman either both lose or both win?"



*Over one hundred
and fifty years ago at Tamarack,
a great stone mansion in the Vermont hills,
Emelie and her secret lover were savagely
destroyed by her jealous husband.*

*Now, another Emelie is in love
at the family estate she inherited—Tamarack.
But that tragic passion from the past threatens
to destroy her future...*



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